Contemplating the Vistas of Piety at the Rila Monastery Pyrgos Asen Kirin

Praise the Lord.... Mountains, and all hills.
—Ps 148:7-9

And they showed to the tsar the mountain and the rock where the holy father dwelled.

And the tsar wanted to go there, but he could not do so because of the desert.

—Vita of St. John of Rila

Built IN 1335, the tower (*pyrgos*) at Rila monastery is best known for the murals in its top-story chapel (1335–42), including representations of the Divine Wisdom, hagiographic scenes of St. John of Rila, and illustrations of the Ainoi or laudatory Psalms 148–50. Although the frescoes have attracted the notice of experts since their discovery in 1944, the tower's architectural design has received less attention (figs. 1–6). The *pyrgos* in Rila belongs to a group of monastic

A brief description of the tower's architecture is included in K. Khristov, G. Stoikov, and K. Miiatev, The Rila Monastery: History, Architecture, Frescoes, Woodcarvings, ed. T. Goranov, trans. B. Athanasor and A. Gospodinov (Sofia, 1959), 35-37, 104-9; L. Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula: Istoriia, arkhitektura, zhivopis (Sofia, 1973), 12-22. Prashkov's book (105-6) contains many references to older publications on St. John of Rila, as well as the history and architecture of Rila monastery. For a discussion of the entire architectural complex see M. Margaritoff, Das Rila-Kloster in Bulgarien: Der Versuch einer historischen und stilistischen Einordnung (Kaiserslautern, 1979); N. Tuleshkov, Arkhitektura na bulgarskite manastiri (Sofia, 1989), 128-29. In some of her older publications, N. Chaneva-Dechevska mentions the tower chapel: Tsurkovnata arkhitektura v Bulgariia prez XI-XIV vek (Sofia, 1988), 137. See also Chaneva-Dechevska's catalogue entry on the tower in Secular Medieval Architecture in the Balkans 1300-1500 and Its Preservation, ed. S. Ćurčić and E. Hadjitryphonos (Thessalonike, 1997), 234.

The frescoes were discovered in 1944, but the campaign for their restoration and conservation began only in 1965. Most scholars agree that the frescoes date to the late 1330s or 1340s. See K. Krustev,

"Srednovekovni stenopisi v Khrel'ovata kula na Rilskiia manastir." Izvestija na Instituta za izobrazitelni izkustva pri BAN I (1956): 181-230; D. Panayotova, Bulgarian Mural Paintings of the 14th Century, trans. M. Alexieva and T. Athanassova (Sofia, 1966), 107-12; Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 22-104; D. Piguet-Panayotova, "La chapelle dans le tour de Khrelju au monastère de Rila," Byzantion 49 (1979): 361-84; Piguet-Panayotova, Recherches sur la peinture en Bulgarie du bas moyen âge (Paris, 1987), 255-312; E. Bakalova, "Kum interpretatsiiata na nai-ranniia zhitien tsikul za Ivan Rilski v izobrazitelnoto izkustvo," Kirilo-Metodievski studii 3 (1986): 146-53; eadem, "Zur Interpretation des frühesten Zyklus der Vita des hl. Ivan von Rila in der bildenden Kunst," in Festschrift für Klaus Wessel zum 70. Geburtstag (in memoriam), ed. M. Restle (Munich, 1988), 39-48; eadem, "Medieval Painting," in Treasures of Christian Art in Bulgaria, ed. V. Pace (Sofia, 2001), 78-100; J. Meyendorff, "Wisdom-Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme," DOP 41 (1987): 391-401; I. Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemanjića (Belgrade, 1994), 18-19, 52, 83-86, 100-102, 136-37. L. Mavrodinova believes that the chapel was painted in the late 14th century; see Stennata zhivopis v Bulgariia do kraia na XIV vek (Sofia, 1995), 69.



Fig. 1 General view of the Rila tower from north (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

Fig. 2 Top story of the Rila tower from north (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

opposite page, top

Fig. 3 West façade of the Rila tower (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiev)

Fig. 4 Top story of the Rila tower from southwest (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiev)

opposite page, bottom

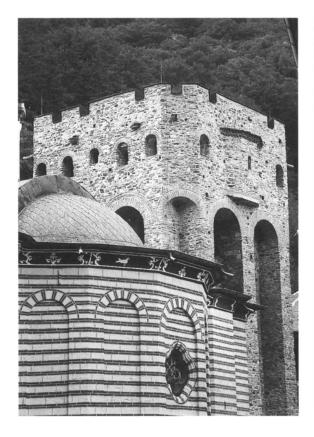
Fig. 5 Top story of the Rila tower from southeast (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiev)

Fig. 6 Nikolai Diakonov, "Rila Monastery with a Hagiographical Cycle of St. John," Moscow 1792, printed with the donation of the Mustakovi brothers of Gabrovo, 55 × 76 cm, Sofia, National Library of Sts. Cyril and Methodios, NBKM Gr iv 498 (photo courtesy of National Library, Sofia)

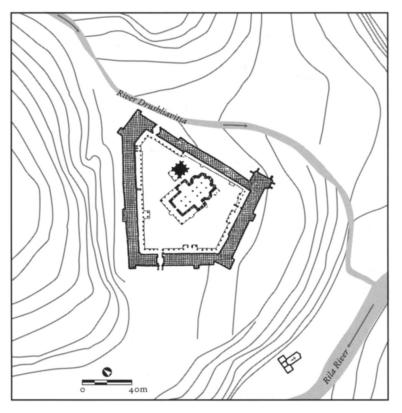












and secular towers built in the Balkans from the tenth to the fourteenth century. These towers have a rectangular ground plan and feature buttresses supporting a top-story gallery (figs. 7, 15–18).² It is clear that the top floor played a crucial role in the way a tower functioned, but our knowledge of top-floor plans is very limited since these spaces have been either destroyed or substantially reconstructed. Remarkably the tower at Rila monastery preserves the original top-story layout, including fortification devices and the aforementioned chapel decorated with frescoes.³

Since the dawn of the Christian ascetic movement in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, hermits have favored a solitary existence in towers. Early monastic complexes usually included large residential towers with a chapel in the uppermost story. In search of elevated sites for seclusion, hermits retreated also to rock-face caves or ascended to the top of monumental columns, as the stylites did. In all these cases, ascetics conceived of their physical isolation and elevation above the ground in symbolic terms—by rejecting the vanity of earthly life they placed themselves closer to the heavenly realm.

- 3 Theocharides wrote ("Observations," 21): "The tower at the Monastery of Rila...is the only one which could be proved to have preserved its original mass in toto and practically unaltered."
- 4 Y. Hirschfeld, The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period (New Haven, 1992), 171–76; J. Patrich, Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism,

Fourth to Seventh Centuries (Washington, D.C., 1995), 126-33; Popović, "Pyrgos," 95-99.

5 In her discussion of early monastic towers, Popović relates their symbolic meaning to the heavenly ladder of St. John Klimakos ("Pyrgos," 57).

Fig. 7 Site map of Rila monastery (drawing by www.archeographics.com after K. Khristov, G. Stoikov, and K. Miiatev, Rilskiiat manastir [Sofia, 1959], fig. 3)

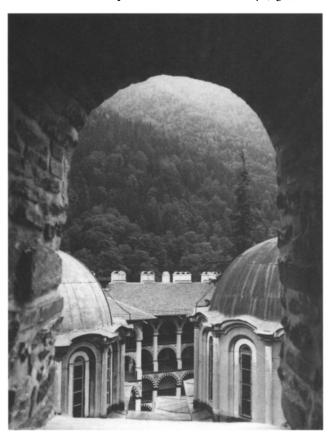
The architectural articulation of wall buttresses evolved through time and it is very likely that their function did as well. See the discussion below, as well as nn. 45 and 46. P. Theocharides counted a total of thirty-two Byzantine buttressed towers, most of which remain unpublished; several of these monuments are badly preserved. The majority of these towers date from the 12th to the late 14th century. Nevertheles. Theocharides' research publicized monuments that may have been built during the 11th or even the late 10th century. The greatest number of buttressed pyrgoi are found on Mount Athos or in its dependencies. Another group is found near Thessalonike, and finally the towers of three monasteries are located in the central Balkan Peninsula: Baniska, Rila, and Tophala on Lake Skodra. See P. L. Theocharides, "Recent Research into Athonite Monastic Architecture, Tenth-Sixteenth Century," Mount Athos and Byzantine Monasticism: Papers from the Twenty-Eighth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1994, ed. A. Bryer and M. Cunningham (Aldershot, 1996), 205-21, esp. 213-14; idem, "Observations on the Byzantine Buttressed Towers of Macedonia," Byzantine Macedonia: Art. Architecture, Music, and Hagiography: Papers of the Melbourne Conference, July 1995, ed. J. Burke and R. Scott (Melbourne, 2001), 20-27; I would like to express my gratitude to N. Bakirtzis for providing me with a copy of this article.

On the better-preserved and more thoroughly studied monuments from this group see also: S. Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," ZbLikUmet 8 (1972): 91-115; S. Ćurčić, "Pyrgos-Stl'p-Donjon: A Western Fortification Concept on Mount Athos and Its Sources," BSCAbstr 7 (1981): 21-22; idem, "Architecture in the Age of Insecurity: An Introduction to Secular Architecture in the Balkans, 1300-1500," Secular Medieval Architecture, 19-68, esp. 41-42 (n. 1 above); P. L. Theocharides, "The Byzantine Fortified Enclosure of the Monastery of Chelandariou: A Preliminary Report," HilZb 7 (1989): 59-69; S. Popović, "Elevated Chapels': The Monastery Tower and Its Meaning," BSCAbstr 19 (1993): 7-8; eadem, "Pyrgos in the Late Byzantine Monastic Context," in Manastir Ziča (Kraljevo, 2000), 95-107.

The tower is one among many features that monastic and secular domestic architecture in Byzantium shared; as Paul Magdalino wrote, the Byzantine monastery was "the alter ego of the secular oikos." In times of crisis the tower would shelter palace occupants. Likewise, when monasteries were attacked or besieged, the pyrgoi served as places of active defense and refuge for the monks, as well as treasuries for the safekeeping of liturgical vessels, textiles, and books. During the Late Byzantine period, when security and survival became dominant concerns, fortification devices became a standard component of both monastic and domestic towers. At this time, more than ever before, it was necessary to find ways of merging fortification and ecclesiastical components within the limited space at the top of pyrgoi.

In the Rila tower, the solution to this design dilemma exemplifies a distinctive Late-Byzantine "architectural jewelry-work." This space is diminutive yet elaborate, and it is cohesive even though it incorporates a variety of components. The top story's layout resembles a Byzantine church but, despite the formal similarities, the spatial units in the tower did not fulfill the same liturgical functions. Also, the components of this space were not articulated on the exterior as much as was usual in Late Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture. The tower walls were a protective outer shell, encasing the top-story space, thus turning it inward upon itself.

A tower by its nature is both a spectacle and a lookout point. To enhance the spectacle of the tower at Rila the builders paid special attention to the articulation and ornamentation of the exterior. On the other hand, to enhance its lookout range, several generously proportioned arched windows allowed for defensive observation and supervision over the monastery (fig. 8). The tower



- 6 "The Byzantine Aristocratic Oikos," in The Byzantine Aristocracy IX to XIII Centuries, ed. M. Angold, BAR International Series 221 (Oxford, 1984), 102. On the conceptual links between secular and monastic architecture see also R. Ousterhout, "An Apologia for Byzantine Architecture," Gesta 1 (1996): 28–32; S.Ćurčić, "Houses in the Byzantine World," in Everyday Life in Byzantium, ed. D. Papanikola-Bakirtzi (Athens, 2002), 229–37, esp. 233.
- 7 R. Krautheimer used this expression in his discussion of Theodore Metochites' chapel at Kariye Camii; see Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, 4th rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, 1986), 443. Ousterhout also used this phrase; see The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul, DOS 25 (Washington, D.C., 1987), 114, and Ousterhout, "Apologia," 28.
- Discussing the aesthetic of fortifications in 10th-century Byzantium, H. Maguire pointed out that "even though towers were a necessity, they could be made a virtue, too ... as look-out points that were intended to provide aesthetic pleasure." In some such instances belvedere elements were added; see H. Maguire, "The Beauty of Castles: A Tenth-Century Description of a Tower at Constantinople," Δελτ.Χριστ. Άρχ.Ετ. 17 (1994): 24. Elsewhere Maguire examined another fortification tower that served as a belvedere and even an imperial dwelling. This is the Tower of Isaac Angelos, which was a part of the large Blachernai palace complex and also overlooked the famous park of Philopation; see H. Maguire, "Gardens and Parks in Constantinople," DOP 54 (2000): 251-64, esp. 252-54, fig. 2. For further information on this monument, see H. J. Magoulias, trans., O City of Byzantium: Annals of Niketas Choniates (Detroit, 1984), 242-43; A. van Millingen, Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historic Sites (London, 1899), 131-53.

Fig. 8 View from the window above the machicolation in the south gallery of the Rila tower (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiey)

served as a reminder of the ever-present observant eye of a senior ascetic or a monastery founder, awareness of whom must have made monks and workers on the grounds more diligent in their duties. When under attack the defenders in the tower would keep watchful surveillance over approaching assailants; but when peace prevailed, the hermits secluding themselves at the top of the tower could contemplate the vista (figs. 9–10). Throughout the medieval world it was mostly palaces and gardens that would incorporate belvedere features. In the case of the Rila tower, the architectural design, mural painting, and topography enhanced the contemplation of its surrounding vista. Most certainly this was not the only monastic building designed to command a wide, pleasant view. Precisely because of this lack of uniqueness, the Rila tower reveals a great deal about the significance of the outward gaze in Byzantine monastic architecture, particularly pyrgoi and elevated living quarters. 11

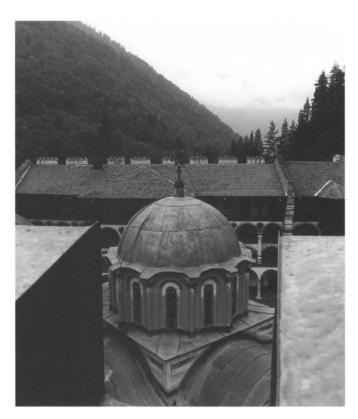
10 On the spiritual significance of the landscape in monastic circles—"le désir d'une elevation de l'âme"—see P. Mylonas, "L'architecture du Mont Athos: Paysage," in Le millénaire du Mont Athos, 963–1963: Études et mélanges (Venice, 1964), 229. On specific monastery sites selected on the basis of both horticultural and aesthetic concerns see A.-M. Talbot, "Byzantine Monastic Horticulture: The Textual Evidence," in Byzantine Garden Culture, ed. A. Littlewood, H. Maguire, and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington, D.C., 2002), 37–41.

II In his study of Byzantine and post-Byzantine residential architecture, N. Moutsopoulos argues that residential towers were among the sources of certain features manifested in both monastic and secular domestic architecture in the post-Byzantine period. Moutsopoulos focuses on the origins and typology of roofed balconies and elevated enclosed spaces projecting from the building's façade and equipped with windows and seats—respectively sachnisi and kioski; see H αρχιτεκτονική προεξοχή "το σαχνίσι": Συμβολή στη μελέτη της ελληνικής κατοικίας (Thessalonike, 1988), esp. 43–63.

9 In the altogether different context of Renaissance France, country estates had their vantage points for supervising servants and workers. On the association of such vigilance with the space of the tower studiolo of a scholar-hermit such as Michel de Montaigne, see G. Hoffmann, Montaigne's Career (Oxford, 1998), 15–17.

Fig. 9 View from the crenellated walkway of the Rila tower, looking west (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiev). This would have been the vista seen from the windows of the west gallery wing before the construction of the nineteenth-century buildings.

Fig. 10 Westward view from the roof of the Rila tower toward the gorge of the Rila River, which defines the route leading to the site of the monastery (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)





The Foundation of the Monastery

The looming forested ridges of the Rila Mountains surround the monastery, which sits on the right bank of the roaring Rila River (figs. 6–7). To reach this site one must proceed eastward through the gorge against the flow of the river and advance toward its source. The harshness of the wilderness drew to this general area the monastery's founder, the recluse St. John (ca. 876–946).¹² Although the tradition of monastic practice in the area goes back to the lifetime of this ascetic saint, the oldest surviving building at the monastery is the late medieval tower. The construction of this tower was part of an extensive building endeavor, also including a *katholikon* of the Athonite triconch design—demolished in 1834—and possibly other buildings of which no substantial record survives.¹³ A Slavonic building inscription in the south

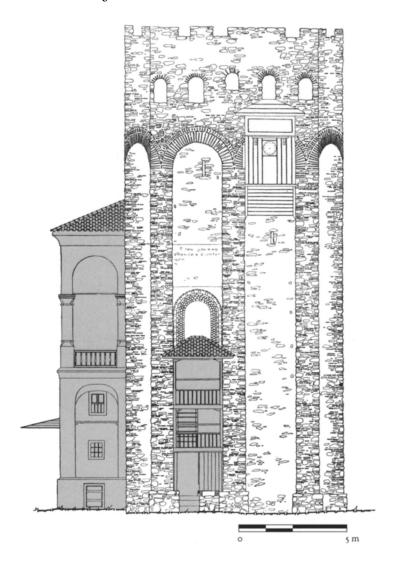
12 The Eastern Orthodox Church commemorates St. John of Rila on 18 August (his dormition) and on 19 October (the transfer of his relics from Sofia to Turnovo).

On 13 January 1833 a major fire destroyed the entire monastery with the exception of the 14th-century katholikon and tower. The following year, when undertaking the rebuilding, the brethren considered the old katholikon too small for their needs and demolished it so they could erect a new, more spacious one. The new katholikon was built between 1 May 1834 and 26 October 1837. The only remnants of the old katholikon are some fragments of its fresco decoration dating to the late 18th century, which at the time of the demolition were preserved and subsequently inserted in the walls in some of the large rooms in the new guest quarters. On the inscription dating the frescoes to August 1794, see L. Stojanović, Stari srpski zapisi i natpisi (Belgrade, 1902), no. 3664; K. Semerdzhiev, Grad Samokov i negovata okolnost (Sofia, 1912), 20. The following is my translation of this inscription, as recorded by L. Stojanović, who published the transcription of a copy once located in the State Archive in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, but subsequently lost.

This godly and hallowed church, dedicated to the Birth of Our All-Holy Mistress and Ever-Virgin Mary, was built in the past and painted by the previous ktetor-who died righteously [a long time ago]—Caesar Khrel'a, the Serbian, whose monastic name was Chariton in the year of the world 6851, December 27, indiction 8 [?]. Now, in recent time, following [the program of] the worn old [original] images, [the frescoes] were beautifully painted [anew] under the supervision of the most honorable hegoumenos kyr Gerasim and at the expense of the most venerable Master Metropolitan, kyr Philotheos of [the city of] Samokov. The second troulo [?] with the vespers and all of the surroundings [?] were celebrated in the year of the world 7302 and the year of the Incarnation of Christ 1794, on the 12th day of August.

Only limited archaeological excavations of the site of the monastery have been conducted. See G. Tsarev, "Khronologiia i etapi na stroezhite v Rilskiia manastir," Vekove 8 (1979): 65-72; Margaritoff, Das Rila-Kloster in Bulgarien (n. 1 above); G. Dzhingov, "Novi danni za stroezha na Rilskiia manastir," Muzei i pametnitsi na kulturata 5 (1981): 17-22; idem, "Arkheologicheski prinosi kum istoriiata na Rilskiia manastir," Arkheologiia 2 (1990): 1-11; A. Kuiumdzhiev, "Edna khipoteza za arkhitekturniia purvoiztochnik na katolikona 'Rozhdestvo Bogorodichno' v Rilskiia manastir," in Svetogorskata obitel Zograf, ed. P. Angelov (Sofia, 1999), 3:324-33. face attests that the tower dedicated to St. John of Rila and the Mother of God Osianovitsa was finished in 1335 (figs. 11, 12).¹⁴

The donor, Protosebast Khrel'o (d. ca. 1342)—was a powerful local lord, who in his lifetime was known widely as an exceptional warrior and a capable diplomat. Centuries after his death, he was celebrated in oral poetry as an epic hero by the name of Hrelja Krilatica—"Khrel'o the Winged One." 15 At the time he erected the Rila tower, Khrel'o acknowledged allegiance to the Serbian king Stefan Dušan (1331-1355). The Serbian crown must have benefited from Khrel'o's military skills and in return rewarded him for his service and loyalty. While expanding their state at the expense of Byzantium and Bulgaria, the rulers of Serbia granted new territories to Khrel'o, whose original domain included the area adjoining the town of Štip. Most likely the region surrounding Rila Monastery came under Khrel'o's control after the battle of Velbuzhd (28 July 1330). This must have been his reward for contributing to the victory of King Stefan Dečanski (1321–1330) and his son Stefan Dušan over the coalition of Emperor Andronikos III Palaiologos (1328–1341) and Tsar Michael III Shishman (1322-1330). Shortly after this, King Dušan must have given Khrel'o control over the region of Strumitsa.¹⁶



- 14 The inscription is positioned above the entrance and rendered in bricks set into the mortar, see Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 11 fig. 4, 102 n. 2 (bibliography), 124 annot. 36 (n. 1 above). The inscription reads: "During the rule of the most exalted master King Stefan Dušan, Master Protosebast Khrel'o, with great effort and expense, built this tower dedicated to the Holy Father John of Rila and to the Mother of God called Osianovitsa in the year 6843 indiction 5 [1335 CE]" (translation mine, after the Slavonic text in S. Smiadovski, Bulgarska kirilska epigrafika IX-XV vek [Sofia, 1993], 71). On two opposing views concerning the local cult of the Mother of God Osianovitsa, see I. Duichev, "Osenovitsa-Asenovitsa," in Sbornik v chest na Aleksandur Teodorov-Balan (Sofia, 1955), 251-56; and A. Kirin, "The Cult of the Mother of God Osianovitsa (She Who Overshadows)," Probleme der Kunst (Sofia, Bulgaria), issue dedicated to Prof. Dr. E. Bakalova (1998): 25-30.
- On the etymology of the personal name Khrel'o/Hrelja/Relja see P. Skok, Etimologijski rječnik hrvatskoga ili srpskoga jezika (Zagreb, 1972), 2:195–96. For a brief survey and commentary on the references to "Relja Krilatica" in oral epic poetry, see M. Dinić, "Relja Ohmučević," ZRVI 9 (1966): 108-17. In general on Khrel'o's career, see K. Jireček, Istorija Srba (Belgrade, 1922-29), 1:265 ff., 280; 2:10; 3:30, nn. 2 and 37; M. C. Bartusis, "Chrelja and Momčilo: Occasional Servants of Byzantium in Fourteenth-Century Macedonia," BSl 41 (1980): 201-21; Istorija Srpskoga naroda, ed. B. Ferjančić (Belgrade, 1981), 1:517-18; S. Ćirković, "Hreljin poklon Hilandaru," ZRVI 21 (1982): 103-17; B. Ferjančić, "Stefan Dušan i srpska vlastela u delu Jovana Kantakuzina," ZRVI 33 (1994): 177-91.
- 6 Dinić, "Relja Ohmučević," 96–97, n. 6.
- **Fig. 11** South elevation of the Rila tower (drawing by www.archeographics.com after Khristov et al., *Rilskiiat manastir*, fig. 47)
- Fig. 12 Donor's inscription above the entrance in the south wall of the Rila tower (drawing by www.archeographics.com after Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, annotation fig. 36)

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The subsequent renewal of Rila Monastery was only one of several large donations that Khrel'o made. In the town of Štip, he dedicated a church, or perhaps an entire monastery, to the Holy Archangels.¹⁷ Apparently Khrel'o considered the archangels his patron saints—the winged heavenly creatures looking after a "winged" earthly warrior.¹⁸ Some of the donations went far beyond the boundaries of Khrel'o's domain. Notably, to Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos he bequeathed the entire Monastery of the Archangels in Štip as well as a settlement located in the area of Strumitsa.¹⁹

Khrel'o's donation campaign fulfilled many functions and conveyed a complex message. Along with the donor's virtuous concerns for his own and his family's salvation, there was also the lordly duty to improve the spiritual life of his subjects. To be sure, there was a political agenda, too. As was customary for royal and aristocratic patronage, Khrel'o's gifts manifested his taking possession of new territory and asserted his power over his enlarged domain as well. The donation to Hilandar monastery indicates the donor's self-esteem: by the beginning of the fourteenth century Mount Athos had long established itself as the foremost center of Byzantine monasticism and the traditional beneficiary of royal donations from the entire Eastern Orthodox world. It is not an accident that, of all the Athonite monasteries, Khrel'o donated specifically to Hilandar. Members of the Serbian ruling dynasty had been showering gifts on this monastery ever since Stefan Nemanja's renewal of it in the year 1198-99.20 This donation of Khrel'o represents a fusion of high aspirations with loyalty and gratitude; in it he asserted his privileged status as one of those capable of making such a bequest, yet he also stressed his awareness of what had made it all possible.

Khrel'o's campaign for rebuilding Rila monastery emphasized a connection with Mount Athos that had a distinctly Hilandar flare. Indeed, triconch *katholika* and monastic pyrgoi constitute the hallmarks of Athonite architecture.²¹ Nonetheless neither Khrel'o nor any prominent contemporary of his would have failed to notice certain instantly recognizable allusions. In Rila monastery, Khrel'o replicated a building program carried out in Hilandar at the turn of the fourteenth century. King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282–1321) built the katholikon of Hilandar in 1303 as a cross-in-square triconch and in addition at least two—or as many as four—fortified pyrgoi of the buttressed type.²² There were many reasons why Khrel'o would have chosen King Milutin as the model to follow. This ruler was the father and grandfather of Khrel'o's sovereigns, Stefan Dečanski and Stefan Dušan, respectively. Furthermore King Milutin, celebrated as a prolific builder, used art and architecture as forceful tools to promote his politics of byzantinizing Serbia while simultaneously

22 Popović, "Pyrgos," 100–101, figs. 3a–c; Theocharides, "Chelandariou," 62–63 (both n. 2 above). It would appear that King Milutin built the majority of these towers within a short time around the year 1300. He also erected a buttressed pyrgos in Serbia at Banjska monastery, which contained his mausoleum church. On the tower at Banjska monastery see S. Popović, Krst u krugu: Arhitektura manastira u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji (Belgrade, 1994), 188–89. The Hilandar pyrgoi formed a well-thought-out defense system intended to protect the

actual monastery complex, the roads leading to it, and the fortress at the arsanas (seaport). Cf. M. Živojinović, Svetogorske kelije i pirgovi u srednjem veku (Belgrade, 1972), 116–28; idem, "Hilandar in the Middle Ages," HilZb 7 (1989): 7–23; S. Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," ZbLikUmet 8 (1972): 91–115; M. Kovačević, "The Hrusija Tower," in Hilandar Monastery, ed. G. Subotić (Belgrade, 1998), 187–96; Ćurčić, "Age of Insecurity," 41–42 (n. 2 above).

- 17 The church of the Archangels in Štip most likely belonged to a monastery; ibid., 100, n. 25. See also Ćirković, "Hreljin poklon Hilandaru." On the architecture of this church see S. Ćurčić, "The Role of Late Byzantine Thessalonike in Church Architecture in the Balkans," DOP 57 (2003): 65–84, csp. 80–81, figs., 37D, 55–56; V. Korać, Spomenici monumentalne Srpske akrhitekture XIV veka u Povardaru (Belgrade, 2003), 81–96, figs. 11–34.
- 18 See above n. 15.
- 19 For a discussion of Khrel'o's patronage based on written sources, see Dinić, "Relja Ohmučević," 97–101; Ćirković, "Hreljin poklon Hilandaru." See also Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele, 18–19, 52–53, 87ff (n. 1 above).
- D. Bogdanović, V. J. Djurić, and D. Medaković, *Hilandar* (Belgrade, 1978).
- On the katholikon of Hilandar Monastery, see S. Nenadović, "Arhitektura Hilandara: Crkve i paraklisi," HilZb 3 (1974): 84-152; idem, Osam vekova Hilandara: Gradjenje i gradjevine (Belgrade, 1997), 59-67, figs. 55-124; Krautheimer, Architecture, 430–31 (n. 7 above); P. Mylonas, "Remarques architecturels sur le catholicon de Chilandar," HilZb 16 (1986): 7-45. For a discussion of the Athonite triconch katholikon in general, see P. Mylonas, "Le plan initiel du catholicon de la Grande Lavra, au Mont-Athos et la génèse du catholicon athonite," CahArch 32 (1984): 89–106; idem, "Le catholicon de Kutlumus (Athos): La dernière étape de la formation du catholicon athonite," CahArch 42 (1994): 75-78.

defying the Byzantine preeminence in the region.²³ In a similar vein, even if on a more modest scale, Khrel'o's patronage seemed to merge acceptance with defiance toward the dominant powers he faced.

For Khrel'o the need for the customary display and assertion of authority over his expanded domain must have been urgent, since he now controlled territories taken from Byzantium and Bulgaria. In fact, at the time when Khrel'o rebuilt Rila monastery, the relics of St. John of Rila were in the city of Turnovo, the capital of Bulgaria. Shortly after a successful rebellion against Byzantium, Tsar Ivan I Asen (1187–1196) transferred the relics to his see in 1195. Throughout the thirteenth century, members of the house of Asen bestowed gifts and privileges on Rila monastery.²⁴ Khrel'o was aware that the tsars of Preslav and Turnovo had already asserted their special association with the figure of St. John of Rila, and he must have regarded his donation as an act of continuing the tradition established by Bulgarian royalty.

This notion found an emphatic expression in the frescoes of Khrel'o's tower chapel, especially in the three hagiographic scenes of St. John of Rila that all depict a single episode, the saint's meeting with Tsar Peter I (927–969) of Preslav. Strikingly, within the hagiographic cycle, the saint and the pious tsar were given equal prominence, both depicted twice within a total of three scenes. The meeting of the hermit and the tsar sets up the premise of the entire fresco ensemble. ²⁵ In light of the politics of that time, this iconographic program could express the patron's conviction that the sources and traditions legitimizing his power went beyond his loyalty to the Serbian court. Khrel'o's domain lay amid Byzantium, Bulgaria, and Serbia, and accordingly his patronage drew on the traditions of all three states. Ultimately this reflected his ambition to attain and assert a certain degree of autonomy.

This aspiration for independence probably brought about Khrel'o's demise. In 1342 he sided with a Byzantine nobleman rebelling against Constantinople the future emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (1347-1354). It seems that in return for this support Kantakouzenos granted Khrel'o the high title of caesar. What followed was a murky affair in which Khrel'o supposedly renewed his loyalty to the Serbian ruler and, seeming to enjoy the trust of both Serbs and Byzantines, served as a mediator in a difficult diplomatic mission that was resolved successfully. Despite this outcome, Khrel'o suddenly retreated to Rila monastery, where he took monastic vows and the name Chariton. These events suggest an imposed exile, albeit a dignified one. Probably late in 1342 Khrel'o died-very likely he was murdered-and his body was buried in the Rila katholikon that he himself had erected. In the wake of these events, King Dušan took over most of the territory of Khrel'o's domain, and later in the century the Bulgarians regained control of Rila monastery.²⁶ An elaborate funeral epigram in Slavonic was carved on Khrel'o's marble tombstone. This ornate lamentation bears testimony to the respect the Rila brethren had for their patron, regardless of the reversal of his fortunes.²⁷

Khrel'o's patronage transformed Rila monastery into his haven, but apparently not a sufficiently safe one. He must have conceived the pyrgos as the dwelling place suitable for his ultimate pious retreat. The alter ego of any Byzantine man of worldly power was a monk: "The king and the monk rule in ways such that it is fairer to call the monk a king than the one who wears a shining, purple robe." Unlike Khrel'o's palaces, his monastic cell did survive. To this day in accordance with the Byzantine custom of *mnemosynon* (commemoration of the founder), the monks of Rila commemorate Caesar Khrel'o by mentioning his name in the celebration of the liturgy at the Rila katholikon.²⁹

23 On the question of the political and cultural conditions of Serbia during the rule of King Milutin and an extensive bibliography on this issue see S. Ćurčić, *Gračanica: King Milutin's Church and Its Place in the Late Byzantine Architecture* (University Park, Pa., 1979), 5–11.

24 I. Duichev, Rilskiiat svetets i negovata obitel (Sofia, 1947), 231–58; idem, Rilskata gramota na tsar Ivan Shishman ot 1378 godina (Sofia, 1986); R. Browning, "John of Rila," ODB 2:1066–67.

25 As E. Bakalova insightfully observed, the main theme of this fresco complex is the relationship between spiritual and secular power; "Kum interpretatsiiata," 152; eadem, "Zur Interpretation"; eadem, "Medieval Painting," 100 (all n. 1 above). On Tsar Peter I of Preslav and his reign, see S. Runciman, The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and His Reign: A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium (Cambridge, 1929), 96-100; idem, A History of the First Bulgarian Empire (London, 1930), 177–205; I. Andreev and M. Lalkov, Istoricheski spravochnik: Bulgarskite khanove i tsare ot khan Kubrat do Tsar Boris III (Veliko Turnovo, 1996), 107-15; I. Bozhilov and V. Giuzelev, Istoriia na Bulgariia v tri toma, vol. 1, Istoriia na Srednovekovna Bulgariia VII–XIV vek (Sofia, 1999), 271-300; J.-M. Mayeur et al., Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours, vol. 4, Évêques, moines et empereurs (610–1054) (Paris, 1993), 921–36; I. Biliarski, "Nebesnite pokroviteli: Sv. Tsar Peter," Istorichesko bŭdeshte 2 (2001): 32-44.

Unfortunately there is no evidence that would allow us to establish whether or not the Rila chapel acquired its frescoes before Khrel'o's death or shortly thereafter. Either way the association of the tower's patron with the pious Tsar Peter I remains a theme of key importance, adding a layer of meaning to Khrel'o's patronage of Rila monastery in general and to the frescoes in the tower chapel in particular. See the discussion below.

- 26 Duichev, *Rilskiiat svetets*, 247–56 (n. 24 above); Dinić, "Relja Ohmučević," 107 (n. 15 above).
- 27 The marble slab with the funerary epigram is only partially preserved (see above, n. 13, and Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 8, fig. 2 [n. 1 above]). The text cited below incorporates additions (including the date, 27 December) coming from copies of this inscription made at the Rila monastery during the first half of the 19th century. In its reconstructed version the inscription reads:

A tomb holds you now lifeless, Caesar, you who only yesterday conversed clearly with us. O, horrible miracle! O, awesome sight! You, who are illustrious, ascended like a sun, a virtue among the virtues, now you lie dead in a small tomb. O, O, you are voiceless and disfigured, deprived of sight, without breath! From this and other pain that your demise brought, Caesar, worthy of any praise, the caesaritsa—your spouse full of sorrow, weeps and suffers, crying mournfully, since she sees you no more, her sweet one. Behold, brethren, and display fervently your appreciation for the one who lies here and was so great in many ways, but now is crammed into this narrow tomb; emulate in every manner his good life. In the year 6851 [1342 CE], indiction one, the month of December, on the 27th day, passed away the glorious Caesar Stefan Khrel'o Dragovol, who took his vows as the monk Chariton, the founder of this holy church.

(translation mine, based on I. Duichev, Iz starata bulgarska knizhnina, vol. 2, Knizhovni pametnitsi ot Vtoroto Bulgarsko Tsarstvo [Sofia, 1943], 283–84; the Slavonic text is in Smiadovski, Bulgarska kirilska epigrafika, 60–61 [n. 14 above]).

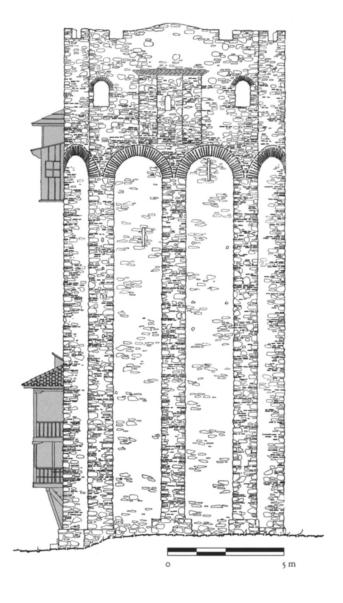
Scholars are divided in their assessment of the events surrounding the end of Khrel'o's life, depending on how much they underplay or emphasize his association with the Serbian court. I. Ivanov and I. Duichev wrote with certainty that Khrel'o was murdered at the orders of King Dušan (cf. Duichev, Rilskiiat svetets, 246-47; Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 106.) On the other hand, M. Dinić suggested that "a sudden heart attack cannot be ruled out." He did acknowledge that "the circumstances in which Khrel'o parted from this world do not strike one as most natural" ("Relja Ohmučević," 106 [n. 15 above]). In the same vein two opposing views concern the language of the fresco inscriptions from

- the tower chapel. E. Kotseva argued that they were in Old Bulgarian, whereas some twenty-five years later I. Djordjević insisted they were in the Serbian version of Old-Slavonic (sprskoslovenski jezik). See E. Kotseva, "Nadpisi kum stenipisite ot paraklisa na Khrel'ovata kula v Rilskiia manastir," Muzei i pametnitsi na kulturata (Sofia) 4 (1969): 18–25, esp. 19; Djordjević, Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele, 137 (n. 1 above). It is tempting to view these scholarly disagreements allegorically, as a form of tribute to Khrel'o and the way he saw his place among the potentates of his time.
- 28 John Chrysostom, Comparatio Regis et monachi 1, trans. D. G. Hunter, A Comparison between a King and Monk/ Against the Opponents of the Monastic Life: Two Treatises by John Chrysostom (Lewiston, N.Y., 1988), 70. See also V. Giuzelev, Kniaz Boris Purvi: Bŭlgariia prez vtorata polovina na IX vek (Sofia, 1969), esp. "Ot trona kum manastira" and "Chernorizetsut durzhavnik," 444-86; V. Djurić, "Le nouveau Joasaph," CahArch 33 (1985): 99-106; I. Djordjević, "Sveti Sava kao Novi Joasaf," Lesnovački zbornik 33 (1993): 161-63; S. Marjanović-Dušanić, Vladarska ideologija Nemanjića:Diplomatička Studija (Belgrade, 1997), esp. the chapter titled "Vladar-monah-svetitelj," 274–86; eadem, "Hilandar, Studenica i Simeon Nemanja; o monašenju vladara u državi Nemanjića," Treća kazivanja o Svetoj Gori (Belgrade, 1999), 60-71.
- 29 On the Byzantine practice of posthumous commemoration of the founder, see J. P. Thomas, *Private Religious Foundations in the Byzantine Empire*, DOS 24 (Washington D.C., 1981), 254. An informative discussion of the founders' ceremonial/liturgical rights is offered in V. Marković, "Ktitori, njihovi dužnosti i prava," *Prilozi za književnost, jezik, istoriju i folklor* 5 (1925): 100–124; S. Troicki, "Ktitorsko pravo u Vizantiji i u Nemanjićkoj Srbiji," *Glas Srpske Kraljevske Akademije* 168 (1935): 81–132, esp. 43ff.

Architecture of the Monastery Tower

Today the tower of Khrel'o stands in the middle of the monastery courtyard surrounded by buildings dating to the early 1800s. The nineteenth-century katholikon rises south of the tower on the site of the old church built by Khrel'o. The original spatial arrangement connecting the pyrgos and the katholikon is still evident in the way in which the entrance to the tower was situated in its south wall. The tower's position in relation to the rest of the original medieval monastery complex remains unclear since virtually no archaeological data related to the lost structures are available.³⁰

Khrel'o's tower has six stories and is 23.6 m high; the exterior walls, 1.8 m thick, are supported by deep and solid foundations. The tower has a rectangular base with sides of unequal length: $7.7 \times 8.2 \times 7.5 \times 8.35$ m. Each façade features a set of three wall buttresses 1.1 m wide and 1.2 m deep. These buttresses rise to the height of 17 m, where they are connected by a series of eight arches supporting the top floor's enclosed gallery. At the four corners, squinches instead of arches link the adjacent buttresses. Behind some of the arches to the north, west, and south,



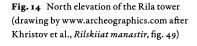
30 Prashkov (Khrel'ovata kula, 15 [n. 1 above]) comments briefly on the traces of buildings once abutting the tower and visible on the lower sections of this structure's north and east façades. It remains unclear when exactly during the long period of time between the 14th and the early 19th century this arrangement was extant. Nor can archaeologists establish whether or not these adjacent buildings belonged to a circuit enclosing the monastery courtyard.

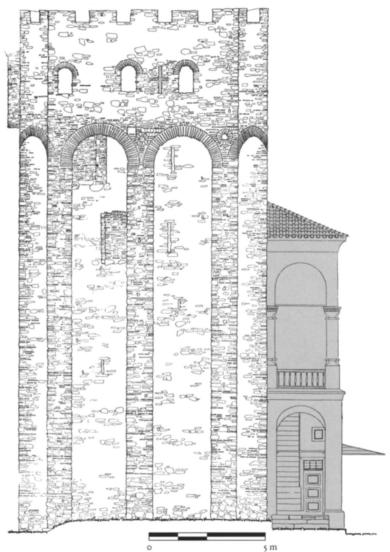
Fig. 13 East elevation of the Rila tower (drawing by www.archeographics.com after Khristov et al., *Rilskiiat manastir*, fig. 50)

the builders inserted slot machicolations—roughly 0.5 \times 1.2 m—accessible from the gallery. The crenellated walkway at the top, reachable only through the interior of the sixth floor, was also crucial for the tower's defense. In the past a pyramidal roof must have covered the tower. Masonry of fieldstones and bricks bonded by lime mortar was used for the exterior walls, while bricks form the arches and squinches connecting the spur walls. Smaller arches outlined in bricks top the windows in the sixth-story gallery (figs. 1–5, 11, 13–15).

On the exterior of the tower all openings are above the first story. The elevated entrance, formerly accessible through a wooden pull-up ladder, is on the second floor, 5.45 m above the ground, in the recess between the buttresses. Seven small slots positioned between the second and fifth levels provide for the lighting and ventilation of the stairwell. In addition five loopholes pierce the exterior walls: three on the fourth floor facing north, west, and east, and another pair in the fifth story's west wall. On the interior the recesses of the loopholes are roughly 1.5 \times 1.5 m, but since they are slanted on the tower exterior, their openings are roughly 0.15 wide and 1 m high. In contrast to these tall,

- 31 The wooden staircase and the belfry (seen in figs. 11, 13–17) are 19th-century additions, cf. Prashkov, *Khrel'ovata kula*, 15, fig. 3.
- 32 One on both the second and the third floor, two on the fourth floor, and three on the fifth floor; see figs. 11, 13–15.

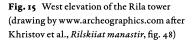


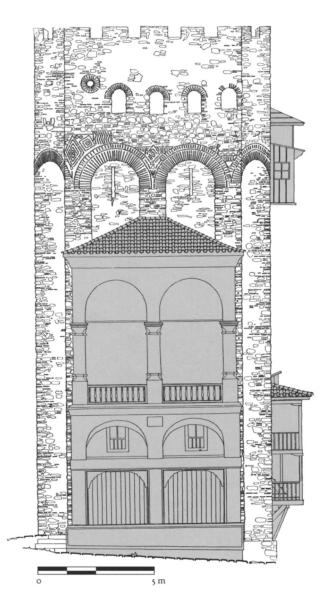


narrow firing slots, two large apertures are positioned in the southeast corner of the fifth floor. These openings lead to narrow platforms fitted between the spur walls. The south corner of the east platform has two alcoves measuring approximately 0.3×0.4 m positioned 1.2 m above the floor level. In the past the platforms extended into wooden balconies (fig. 16).³³ On the sixth story the gallery features fourteen generously proportioned windows facing all four directions. Arches crown these windows, which measure 0.7×1.1 m and open at a height of 1.1 to 1.2 m above the floor. These windows make the top story the best-lighted and best-ventilated part of the tower interior (figs. 2–5, 8).

On the exterior of the tower, brick ornamentation enlivens the walls. The arches and squinches consist of radially laid bricks delineated by brick bands. Above the southwest squinch, as well as above each of the arches on the west and south façades, there is a second concentric arch formed by bricks one third the size of the regular ones. The builders tried to coordinate the voussoirs of these concentric arches. The spandrels between the arches display brick bands, which

33 The mechanism of the tower's 19th-century clock occupied the south balcony; see figs. 6 and 11. The local monastic tradition retains the reference to these balconies as "swallows' nests"—a place of ascetic isolation. See Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 15. Similar to these two balconies was the arrangement of the entire uppermost story of King Milutin's tower of Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos. See the discussion below and nn. 46 and 49.

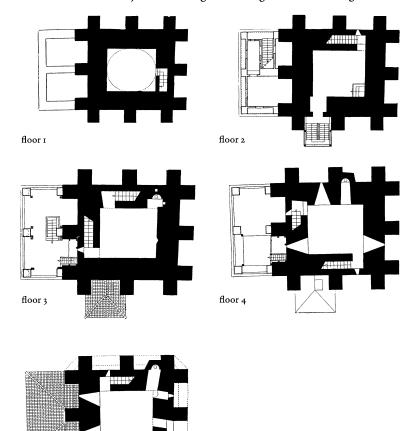




are horizontal (north and east) and vertical (west and south). Also within the spandrels are other brick patterns: on the north façade, decorative roundels and dentils; to the west, diamond, herringbone, and star forms.³⁴ The asymmetric and unpredictable distribution of brick patterns on the spandrels reflects a common practice in Late Byzantine architecture.³⁵ Both the pattern inventory and manner of execution of this brick decoration have much in common with contemporary monuments in Macedonia and Epiros and in particular with the fourteenth-century additions to the tower of St. Sava in Hilandar monastery.³⁶

The surface ornamentation is concentrated on the spandrels, but there are also some isolated areas decorated with bricks above and below the arches. On the level of the gallery windows the north façade displays a cross approximately 1 m high; its bars are composed of dentils. Similarly, on the tower's west face, a decorative roundel of radially placed bricks appears to the left and slightly above a row of four gallery windows. Three stories below, the south façade features the building inscription rendered in carved bricks. On the surface of the wall below the inscription and above the entrance to the tower there is a tympanum articulated in dentils, perhaps intended to accommodate a representation of the patron saint.

The exterior ornamentation of the tower may be sparse, but it is hardly random. The brick decoration is carefully coordinated with the architectural articulation of the façade and the general design of the building. Surface



- 34 In the central spandrel of the north face there is a rectangular brick imbedded in the mortar so that its wider side is exposed. In size this brick appears to be identical to the ones used as voussoirs in the arches and squinches connecting the spur walls. This brick plaque displays an incised inscription, which is virtually impossible to read. Apparently in Slavonic, this inscription runs two or three lines, of which one can decipher only the name "Mikhail" (Michael). Only a close examination of the wall surface. which is impossible without scaffolding, could establish whether or not this inscription belongs to the original building phase or to a later repair. In case this brick proves to be a part of the original masonry and if the name Michael refers to the archangel, this might be yet another piece of evidence for Khrel'o's devotion to the holy archangels. See above, n. 15.
- 35 Cyril Mango noted a "charming disregard for symmetry" among the exuberant geometric exterior decoration of Kato Panagia near Arta, and Porta Panagia close to Trikkala, see C. Mango, Byzantine Architecture (New York, 1985), 146.
- 36 Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," 100–107, figs. 6–9 (n. 22 above); Nenadović, *Osam vekova Hilandara*, 226– 28, fig. 283 (n. 21 above).

Fig. 16 Plans, from the ground level through the fifth story of the Rila tower (after Khristov et al., *Rilskiiat manastir*, fig. 46)

floor 5

ornamentation appears around the entrance and on the level of the uppermost story and thus draws attention to these two essential components of the building. In other words, the outward expression of the tower signals the presence of a sacred space within and marks an important threshold on the way to it.

In the interior, the staircase connecting the stories and providing access to the roof is only 0.65 to 0.75 m wide and is built within the thickness of the exterior walls. Such a staircase built in stone and bricks, instead of wood, increased security by making the tower less vulnerable to fire damage, whether by accident or military attacks. Another feature of the tower designed to save lives during sieges, a water well was burrowed through the floor of the first story. In addition three latrine recesses were built in the eastern section of the north wall on the third, fourth, and fifth levels; another latrine or washing niche occupies the northeast corner of the top story. From the first to the fifth floor, no interior spaces feature partitions (figs. 16, 17).

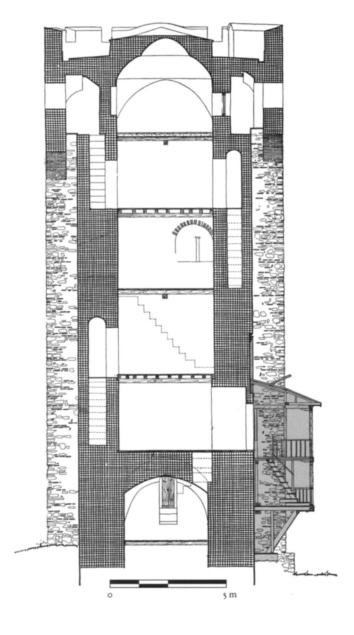
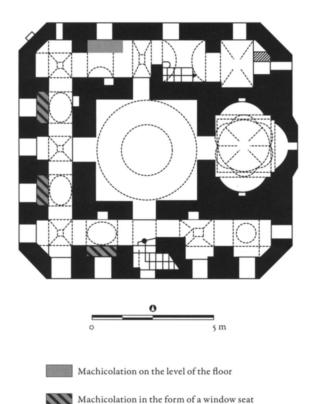


Fig. 17 Cross-section along the main south-north axis looking east (drawing by www.archeographics.com after Khristov et al., Rilskiiat manastir, fig. 51)

ASEN KIRIN IIO

In contrast to this, the top story has an intricate layout. This space accommodates the hermit's chapel, consisting of two domed chambers: to the east a small triconch 3.75×2.7 m, and to the west a larger room square in plan, 4.1 \times 4.28 \times 4.05 \times 4.25 m (fig. 18). The gallery, 1.55 m wide and 2 m high, envelops the chapel from north, west, and south. It consists of thirteen bays separated by twelve arches, four in each wing. Furthermore the gallery's outer walls are lined with arched niches 1.8 m high, one per bay and two at each of the four corners. Four of the niches accommodate both a window and a machicolation. In the walls facing three of the machicolations there are small alcoves of the same type as those seen in the east balcony on the fifth floor. These recesses could have held various small objects which, depending on the circumstances, could be used either in the active defense of the tower or in certain monastic practices.³⁷ The openings of the machicolations are covered with large wooden boards. In the north gallery the board covering the machicolation lies on the level of the floor, whereas in the west and south wings these wood planks are elevated as high as 0.41 m, thus forming benches or what might be described more appropriately as window seats (figs. 19-24).38

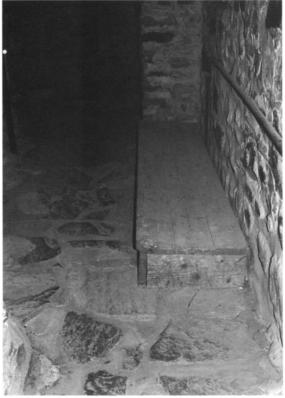
The west chapel chamber is the largest compartment, occupying the center of the top-story interior. Four doorways positioned on the cardinal axes connect this room with the gallery and the east chamber. This layout allowed for unobstructed movement within the central and western portions of the sixth floor.³⁹ Besides making all defense features located on the sixth floor easily accessible, the builders facilitated the approach to the crenellated walkway at the top of the tower. The west chamber secured the most direct connection between the stairs from the fifth story and the flight of steps leading to the roof—located, respectively, in the north and south gallery wings (fig. 18).



- 37 Here each of the niches faces a machicolation: one in the north and west galleries and two in the gallery's south wing. See the discussion below of the possible monastic functions of these spaces as niches for seclusion.
- At present the height of the masonry supporting the raised planks varies: in the south gallery it is 0.23 m high, while in the west gallery the south bench is 0.15 m and the north bench is 0.41 m above floor level. It is possible that originally all benches had the same height and that the present differences resulted from subsequent damage to the masonry due to the use of the machicolations for defense. If these discussed differences were in fact a part of the original building phase, then it is unclear what made this arrangement necessary. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. A. Kuiumdzhiev, who at my request took measurements in the Rila tower's top story.
- 39 This arrangement facilitated both the defensive and the monastic uses of this space. On the possible ascetic functions of the uppermost story, see the discussion below.

Fig. 18 Plan of the sixth story in the Rila tower, including vaulting and indicating the position of the machicolations (drawing by www.archeographics.com and M. Reynolds after Prashkov, *Khrel'ovata kula*, fig. 8)







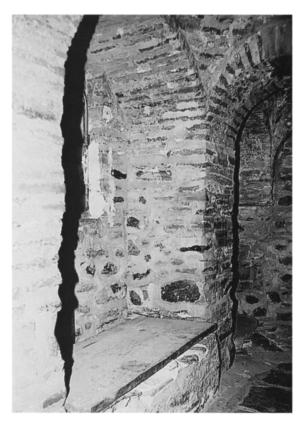
clockwise from top left

Fig. 19 Rila tower gallery north wing, looking east (photo by author)

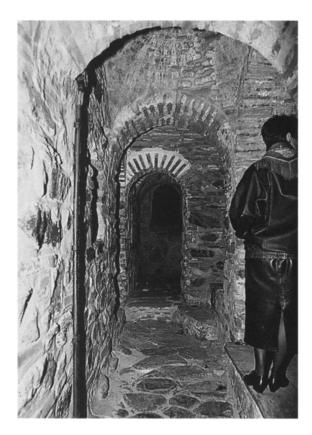
Fig. 20 Machicolation in the north gallery of the Rila tower (photo courtesy of A. Kuiumdzhiev)

Fig. 21 Rila tower gallery, west wing, looking north (photo by author)

ASEN KIRIN II2







clockwise from top left

Fig. 22 Rila tower gallery, west wing, north machicolation (photo by author)

Fig. 23 Rila tower gallery, west wing, south machicolation (photo by author)

Fig. 24 Rila tower gallery, south wing, looking east (photo by author)

The ultimate point of the movement through the chapel is the remote triconch area, which originally did not communicate with the gallery and is accessed only through the west chamber. In fact, by situating the triconch in the space that could have accommodated a fourth gallery wing, the builders prevented the construction of machicolations on the east side of the top story. Certainly, the reason was not that the tower's east side needed less defense.⁴⁰ The small scale of the top-story interior—apparent as it might be—cannot fully explain the existing arrangement. The triconch chamber had to terminate in the outer east wall because it accommodated the chapel's altar area and no utilitarian spaces of any kind could be positioned immediately east of it. The builders articulated the sanctuary on the exterior of the building by rendering the eastern niche of the triconch chamber as a corbeled three-sided apse projecting from the tower's east façade (figs. 5 and 13). As a result, the chapel's most sacred part soared far above the ground, thus stressing the symbolic implications of its elevated position. In addition the east conch has a window centered on the top story's main east-west axis. This narrow aperture is the only direct source of natural light in the two chambers of the chapel, since all other windows are located in the gallery. Both literally and figuratively, the window in the apse sets the spotlight on the triconch, which is after all the focal point of the top-story interior.

Timber floors are present throughout the tower except for the second story, where this building's only entrance is located, and predictably the crenellated walkway at the very top, both of which rest on vaulting. The use of vaulting in these two most vulnerable parts of the building reflected the builders' concern to limit the extent of possible fire damage. 41 Nevertheless pragmatism alone cannot account for the specific arrangement of the vaulting in the tower. Whereas a simple domical vault covers the first floor, at the tower's top there are domes of two different kinds, as well as barrel, groin, and domical vaults. Within the top story, the builders gave priority to the two chambers of the chapel in relation to the gallery. Although the distribution of vaults reflects wall divisions, the choice of specific vaulting types is not determined by the floor plan and scale of the covered spaces. This was possible because the diminutive scale of the space allowed for certain discrepancies, such as domical and groin vaults placed above irregular rectangular bays, instead of proper square ones. The ultimate outcome was that the builders seized the opportunity to use vaulting to express a hierarchy of function.

The barrel and groin vaults throughout the gallery appear to be the least charged with iconographic functions—in fact every other bay features a groin vault. The groin vaults alternate with barrel vaults in the utilitarian north wing and with domical vaults throughout the gallery's west and south sections.⁴² It appears that the domical vaults assumed the iconographic function of domes: marking the bays equipped with benches and windows (figs. 18 and 21).

The west chamber features a blind dome on pendentives with a diameter of 4 m. The springing line of the pendentives is only 0.7 m above the floor, whereas the springing line for the dome itself is at the level of 2.5 m. At the height of approximately 3.5 m, the dome's shell changes its curve and becomes much steeper, thus forming a smaller and more elevated dome with a diameter of 2 m (fig. 17). This arrangement allows for maintaining the maximum height of 3.96 m, which is virtually identical to the east chamber's height—if built following the original curve, the crown of the west dome would not have been sufficiently high. At the same time, the vaulting in the west chamber reduces the sense that the large dome is pressing down on the small interior. Instead, with the

40 The embrasures on the east side of the tower's fourth and fifth floors could have been viewed as sufficient compensation for the lack of machicolations on the east side of the sixth story, as could have the pair of balconies located in the southeast corner on the fifth floor.

41 The same concern might have determined the flooring on the sixth story. Over the timber subflooring the builders put stone pavement, except for the west chamber, where instead of stone they used bricks.

42 Barrel vaults cover the bays through which the staircase is accessed in the north and south wings, while all three types of vaulting appear above the bays featuring machicolations. A groin vault surmounts the northeastern bay containing the washing/latrine niche.

steep little dome added, the space seems to soar upward (fig. 25). This effect is further enhanced by the unusually low—well beneath eye level—springing line of the pendentives, drawing visitors into the movement of the vaults that ascend within the interior. They do not have to look up to see the vaults—the dome surrounds them.

The most elaborate dome in the tower sets apart the chapel's east chamber (figs. 18, 26–28). Here a blind melon dome consisting of six concave segments rests on four pendentives. The diameter of the scalloped dome is 1.8 m and its apex reaches the height of 3.98 m. The dome rises above the semi-domes topping the three conches. When facing east, upon entering this chamber visitors see no flat walls but only the curving surfaces of the conches and the vaulting. The enfolding walls and the beam of light coming from the narrow slot of the apse window dominate this diminutive space.



Fig. 25 Rila tower, top story, west chamber, looking northeast (photo by author)

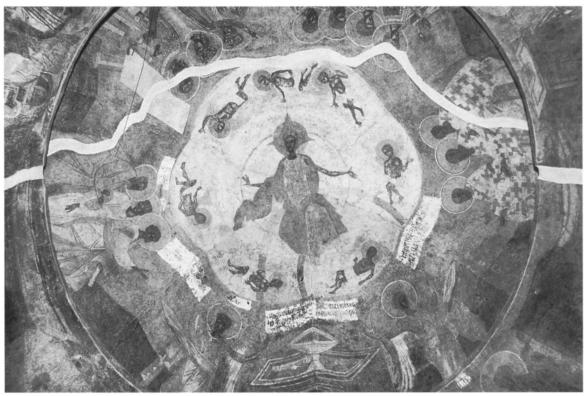


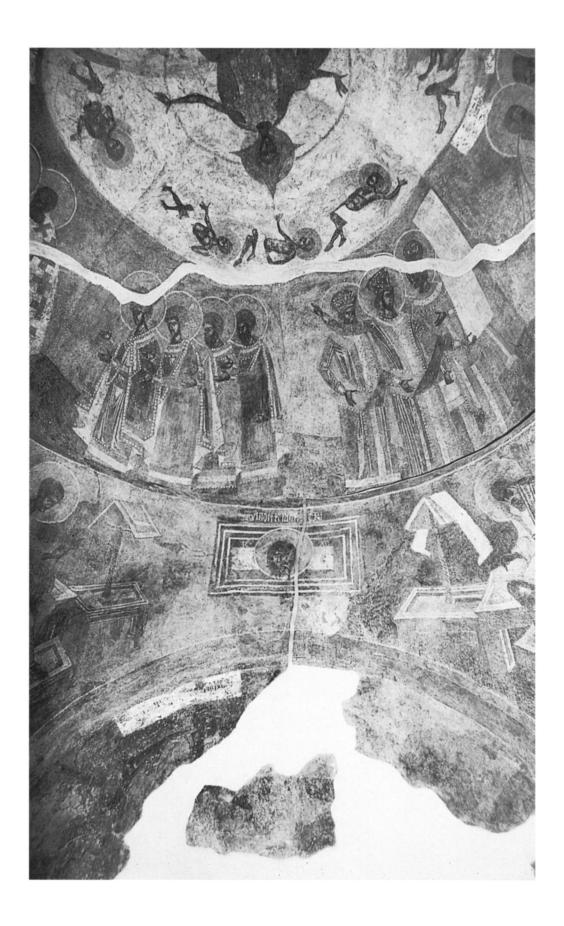
Fig. 26 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, altar apse (photo by author)

opposite page

Fig. 28 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, partial view of the dome including the lunette above the doorway in the west wall (photo by author)

Fig. 27 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, dome, The Holy Wisdom (photo by author)





The exact manner in which ascetics used this tower remains a subject of conjecture because no surviving written sources describe the activities that occurred there. Nevertheless, this building's distinctive architecture allows certain conclusions. The interior spaces below the top story were not equipped for any purpose other than defense. In contrast, the builders outfitted the top story with the devices that would enable it to serve two distinct purposes active defense and spiritual exercise. Here distinguished ascetics and their disciples could celebrate the liturgy and pray in seclusion. The primary function of the triconch east chamber probably involved these two activities. In fact this is the only compartment of the sixth-story interior not equipped for any kind of active defense: apparently traffic could not proceed through it, nor could it be a point of surveillance since the apse window is quite small. The less prominent the defense purpose, the higher the status of an individual interior space in the overall hierarchy of function. Accordingly the west room represents the next descending level, since this space's sole contribution to active defense was to accommodate traffic. For the most part, it was a place for common prayer or for disciples to await the appearance of a holy man who would emerge from the east chamber after benefiting from the privilege of spending periods of time there.

The gallery, while accommodating fortification devices and defense activities, also fulfilled specific monastic functions. For instance, the units equipped with benches, windows, and, in three examples, a small alcove in the facing wall might have been areas of seclusion and meditation for ascetics. The alcoves could have held small objects such as lamps, vessels, books, or even icons. Notably domical vaults differentiate these particular spatial units, thus indicating the significance of the activities occurring within them. In addition to being well lit, these must have been the warmest spaces in the top story since they face south and west. In contrast the northern gallery wing had distinctly utilitarian purposes—all the traffic went through this point of access to the sixth floor. Furthermore here is the latrine/washing niche, consistent with the rest of the tower interior, which contains lavatories in the north sections on the fifth, fourth, and third floors.

Another distinctive feature of the top-story gallery is its fourteen lookout points; when standing in front of any of the windows, a person of average height would have a wide view of the area surrounding the tower. In a similar manner, the balconies, once occupying the southeast section of the fifth floor, could have served for both active defense and observation (figs. 2–5, 8–10). Nonetheless, in the top-story gallery the sheer number and the relatively large size of the windows suggest that observation of the area surrounding the tower was more than utilitarian.

The whole process of climbing the tower to its top story ultimately creates the expectation of achieving some spiritually important experience. A visitor to the tower would ascend from floor to floor through the narrow tunnel of the staircase. This slow advance would lead to a series of dark and damp spaces, and finally to the top story, which is breezy and drenched in light, filled with the colors of the vista outside and the frescoes inside. This sensory experience would make the journey up through the tower a symbolic ascent to heaven. From the tower's top the vista is impressive, yet the windows crowned by brick arches emphatically frame the views, making them even more consequential (fig. 8).

Unlike common monastic cells, the niches of seclusion in the gallery are not separated from each other and afford virtually no privacy. It seems that the ascetics had to make concessions for the sake of security and the benefits of occupying a space elevated high above the ground. Even so, the actual

⁴³ Since within the tower this is the only well-ventilated space, arrival at the final destination is signaled not only by architectural and artistic devices, but also literally by a breath of fresh air.

arrangement, resulting from both scale and layout, could have compensated for the lack of privacy, since the gallery allowed for only one person at a time to stand or sit in front of a window. By directing the visitor's gaze toward the view outside, the builders provided some privacy within the interior, where the individual bays with picture windows constituted parts of the gallery's continuous space. This architectural design is remarkably subtle and perceptive. The overall arrangement of the gallery at the tower summit reveals both an understanding and an appreciation of the intrinsically meditative and solitary nature of the act of contemplating a vista.

The question about the origins of the Byzantine tower with spur walls is at the center of an ongoing debate that focuses on early examples.⁴⁴ Since the Rila monument is one of the later buttressed pyrgoi, this study does not deal with the origins of this architectural type. Instead, it concentrates on the arrangement of tower summits—multifunctional spaces planned especially to balance pragmatic and symbolic concerns. Even the scarce available evidence reveals a variety of individual design solutions distinguished by the different degrees to which Byzantine builders merged the devices for active defense with elevated chapels and other spaces intended for monastic use.

Buttressed towers usually featured six or seven stories and had a square or rectangular plan with spur walls often crowned by arches.⁴⁵ The buttresses provided for enlarging the area of the uppermost one or two floors.⁴⁶ It was not the amount of room gained but its function that mattered most. A wider

45 In some of the Early Byzantine pyrgoi, the wall buttresses are less pronounced and appear only on those sides of the building that were considered more vulnerable. This was the case with St. Sava's tower built sometime around 1186 at Hilandar monastery, which lacked buttresses on its west sidethe one facing the monastery courtyard. See Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," 105 (n. 22 above); Theocharides, "Chelendariou," 60-63, figs. 1-3; Popović, "Pyrgos," 100, fig. 3 (n. 2 above). In general, later monuments have deeper buttresses, which were distributed symmetrically along all four sides of the towers. Byzantine builders might have perceived the spurs as a means of reinforcing a building and helping to sustain the weight of its uppermost floor.

On the function of tower buttresses in general, see A. Chatelain, Donjons romans des Pays d'Ouest: Étude comparative sur les donjons romans quadrangulaires de la France de l'Ouest (Paris, 1973), 27–35, esp. 28–26; idem, Évolution des châteaux forts dans la France au Moyen Âge (Milan, 1981), 132–34; E. A. Fisher, Anglo-Saxon Towers: An Architectural and Historical Study (Newton Abbot, 1969), 116–19.

46 This might have been the original arrangement of the towers of St. Sava and St. George at Hilandar monastery on Mount

Athos. The reason for such an assumption is that the arches connecting the buttresses are on the level of the crenellated walkway. Cf. Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," 100-109, figs. 6-10. In both towers the top story, immediately below the walkway, underwent substantial reconstructions. The Tower of St. Sava of Serbia, originally erected in the 12th century, had a 14thcentury phase and a chapel dated 1682; the Tower of St. George, from the 2nd half of the 13th century, underwent reconstruction on its uppermost floor in 1671. Nenadović, "Arhitektura Hilandara," 158-63; Nenadović, Osam vekova Hilandara, 226-37, figs. 281-95 (both n. 21 above); B. Todić, "Freske XIII veka u papaklisu na pirgu Sv. Georgija u Hilandaru," HilZb 9 (1997): 35-70.

In the Tower of King Milutin, also belonging to Hilandar monastery, there is a partially surviving squinch between the buttresses at the southeast corner of the tower on the level above the top-story chapel. As Ćurčić pointed out, this monument might have had a crenellated walkway as well; see "Tower of King Milutin: Mt. Athos, Greece," in Secular Medieval Architecture, 216–17 (n. 1 above). On the arrangement of the space surrounding the top-story chapel in King Milutin's tower, see the discussion below.

44 In 1979 at Kaiserslautern University, M. Margaritoff completed his doctoral dissertation dedicated to the architecture of Rila monastery. Margaritoff discussed the Rila pyrgos in connection with the related Athonite monuments and along with French donjons. According to him, the design of the Rila tower reflected the influence of French fortification architecture that had reached the Balkans by two different means: (1) the Frankish presence on the Peloponnesos; and (2) the direct connections between the Frankish state and medieval Bulgaria via the heretical Bogomil communities present in both states. The unsustainable argument about an alleged "Bogomil connection" aside, Dr. Margaritoff's dissertation is a thorough and well-argued work, one of the most lucid and reliable studies of the architecture of Rila monastery; unfortunately, since it is unpublished, it is not easily obtainable. Cf. Margaritoff, Das Rila-Kloster in Bulgarien, esp. 31-32, 86-107, figs. 202-4, 219-22, and 232-40 (n. 1 above).

In 1981, independent of Margaritoff, S. Ćurčić advanced the view that buttressed pyrgoi reflected a Western fortification concept manifested in 12th- and 13thcentury French donjons since these donjons and the pyrgoi display similar articulation, planning, and even scale. Ćurčić saw this as one among the many other Western features of the architecture sponsored by Serbian rulers, who had close dynastic connections with the French royal family. Hilandar monastery played a key role in the proliferation of the buttressed pyrgos since it had five towers of this type built between the 13th and the early 14th century (see above, n. 2). Ćurčić, "Pyrgos-Stl'p-Donjon," 21-22, and "Age of Insecurity," 41-42, fig. 23 (both n. 2 above).

In the debate surrounding this hypothesis, S. Popović accepted the possibility of East–West exchanges (*Krst u Krugu*, 188–94 [n. 22 above]). Presenting an opposing point of view, Theocharides argued that the towers with wall buttresses continued Byzantine developments, which predated the alleged Western prototypes. See Theocharides, "Chelendariou," 63–64, n. 16; idem, "Observations" (both n. 2 above); P. Theocharides and I. Papaggelos, "Galatista," in *Secular Medieval Architecture*, 222 (n. 1 above).

top story allowed for better active defense, since the areas between the wall buttresses frequently accommodated devices to protect the lower sections of the exterior. The Rila tower featured two different kinds of such devices. First there was a pair of wooden balconies, once occupying the recesses between the buttresses in the southeast corner of the fifth floor. Second, there still exist four machicolations positioned on the sixth floor. Placing fortification and monastic features on the same story involved the spatial and functional division of that floor into a core containing a chapel with enveloping areas used for active defense.

Apart from the Rila pyrgos, three other well-documented examples of buttressed pyrgoi display different variants of this spatial arrangement at their summits: the towers of St. Sava, St. George, and King Milutin at Hilandar monastery. The chapel at the Tower of St. Sava was built in 1682, but the latter two monuments, dating, respectively, to the second half of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, might have informed the decisions of the builders who worked under the auspices of Khrel'o. 48 In these two towers, the chapels took over the entire top-story interior, and the areas used for active defense appeared as open galleries or balconies built of wood. For instance, at the top of King Milutin's tower the builders set back the exterior walls, thus enclosing only the core of the uppermost floor, where the chapel was, while leaving open the areas that enveloped it. These enveloping areas consist of elongated narrow platforms at the level of the top story's floor that extend into the flat tops of the spurs terminating at the same height. The platforms support the wooden balconies surrounding the chapel and bridging the open spaces between the spurs; balconies envelop the top story's core on all four sides. As such, the wooden additions are contained within the general volume of the building (fig. 29).49

In contrast to this, the Tower of St. George had wooden balconies extending beyond the building's façades to the north, west, and south. The balconies formed a second outer layer of space enveloping the chapel—the first layer was the enclosed gallery, lacking any defense features and apparently intended only for monastic use. ⁵⁰ Doorways piercing the tower's outer walls provided access from the gallery to the balconies (fig. 30). ⁵¹

This tendency to separate fortification and monastic features located on the same floor is seen in two post-Byzantine towers lacking the characteristic wall buttresses. These are the pyrgoi of Karakallou monastery and the Iveron monastery's arsanas. In both instances there are four lateral corridors surrounding the chapel and containing machicolations, an arrangement that could provide equal defense to all four external walls of the tower. In each monument these four corridors are detached from one another, and each of them communicates with the interior's center through passageways (figs. 31, 32). ⁵²

- 50 The monastic function of the gallery is prominently manifested in the frescoes painted on its walls; see Todić, "Freske XIII veka" (n. 46 above).
- 51 Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," 107–9, fig. 10; idem, "Arhitektura Hilandara," 158–61, fig. 63 (n. 21 above); Todić, "Freske XIII veka," 38.
- 52 The Karakallou Tower dates to the 16th century. The pyrgos of the arsanas of the monastery of Iveron, dating to 1625, has on the north wall, in a space between the chapel and the monastic cell, a window with a view of the open sea; see P. L. Theocharides, P. Foundas, and S. Stefanou, Mount Athos (Athens, 1992), 37–38, figs. 7 and 9.

47 H. Kennedy refers to this type of machicolation as "slot machicolations"; see Crusader Castles (Cambridge, 1994), 152-53, fig. 56. A. Chatelain described them as "mâchicoulis sur arcs tendus entre contreforts" (Évolution des châteaux forts, 132 [n. 45 above]). Later buildings did not feature wall buttresses; instead their upper sections displayed corbeled friezes, which took over the function of supporting the machicolations. This arrangement was used as early as the 1340s in the fortress of Pythion built by John VI Kantakouzenos (M. Korres and C. Bakirtzis, "Fortress of Pythion, Greece," in Secular Medieval Architecture, 158-61). The same transformation in the construction of machicolations occurred in the west of Europe as well. A. Chatelain observed that during the 1300s corbeled machicolations became a standard feature of fortification architecture in France, replacing the older type of machicolations fitted behind the arches connecting buttresses (Évolution des châteaux forts, 132).

During the post-Byzantine period, Athonite towers often featured box machicolations. For an example of a post-Byzantine pyrgos with box machicolations, see P. L. Theocharides, "Οι οικοδομικές φάσεις του πύργου της Μ. Σταυρονικήτα," in Αρμός, Τιμητικός τόμος στον καθηγητή Ν. Κ. Μουτσόπουλο για τα 25 χρόνια πνευματικής του προσφοράς στο πανεπιστήμιο (Thessalonike, 1991), 681–99. For box machicolations in general, see Kennedy, Crusader Castles, 152–57.

- 48 Although the Tower of St. Sava of Serbia was built in the 12th century, the original arrangement of its top story is unknown, since the building underwent substantial reconstruction in 1682, when the present uppermost level was added. Alteration in 1671 to the top story of the Tower of St. George, dating originally from the 2nd half of the 13th century, did not obliterate its original layout.
- 49 Nenadović, "Odbrana manastira Hilandara," 112–13, figs. 11–12 (n. 22 above); idem, "Konzervacija pirga kralja Milutina u Hilandaru," Zbornik zastite spomenika kulture 16 (1965): 175–81, figs. 1–10; idem, Osam vekova Hilandara, 238–41, figs. 297–302 (n. 21 above); Ćurčić, "Tower of King Milutin," 216–17 (n. 46 above). In fact there is the same arrangement in the southeast corner of the Rila tower's fifth floor; see the discussion above.

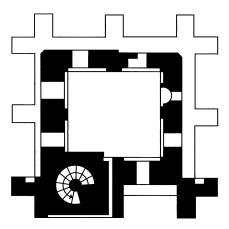


Fig. 29 Tower of King Milutin, Hilandar Monastery, plan of the uppermost floor (drawing by M. Reynolds after S. Nenadović, Osam Vekova Hilandara: Gradjenje i gradjevine [Belgrade, 1997], 239, fig. 299)

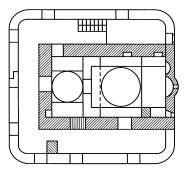


Fig. 30 Tower of St. George, Hilandar Monastery, plan of the uppermost floor (drawing by M. Reynolds after S. Nenadović, "Arhitektura Hilandara: Crkve i paraklisi," Hilandarski sbornik 3 [1974]: fig. 63)

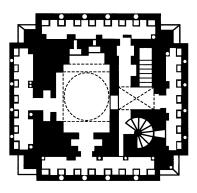


Fig. 31 Karakala Monastery tower, plan of the top floor (drawing by M. Reynolds after A. K. Orlandos, *Monasteriaki architektoniki* [Athens, 1958], 134, fig. 161)

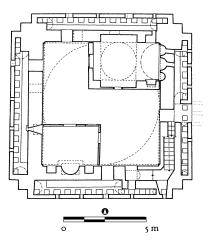


Fig. 32 Boat House tower, Iveron
Monastery, plan of the top floor (drawing by
www.archeographics.com after P. L.
Theocharidis, P. Founas, and S. Stefanou,
Mount Athos [Athens, 1991], 36, fig. 7)

Viewed against this background, the towers of Khrel'o and of St. George stand out because the layout of their summits reveals a deliberate attempt to emulate a church plan.⁵³ Not only does the top story of these two monuments contain a chapel, but, more important, all components of this floor's interior are integrated into a cohesive whole resembling a church. Notably, in both towers, the gallery was not extended to the east, which enabled the masons to articulate the chapels' oriented apses on the exterior.

In the tower summit at Rila, the spatial separation generally corresponds to the customary division of Byzantine churches. The east and west chambers are analogous, respectively, to a bema and nave, and the three gallery wings correspond to a narthex and a pair of ambulatories. ⁵⁴ Evident as it might be, this correspondence is not fully consistent either in terms of architectural articulation or with regard to the functions of the individual spatial units. Originally this tower summit was intended not for the regular celebration of the liturgy, but for the isolation of distinguished ascetics and their disciples, whose seclusion enabled them to dedicate themselves to perpetual prayer.

Ultimately, because the tower summit strongly resembles a church, the perception of this space and the activities that took place in it must have acquired additional layers of meaning. By evoking associations with a narthex and ambulatory wings, the gallery emphasized its actual distance and high degree of separation from the natural surroundings—when in this space one would only look out but not go outside. The niches with benches along the gallery's outer walls resemble the tomb-containing arcosolia often found in the spaces enveloping the nave of Late Byzantine churches.⁵⁵ Certainly sitting on an architectural memento mori while spending entire nights in prayer must have given emphasis to the ascetics' rejection of earthly existence and the desire to cross the threshold into eternal life.⁵⁶

From the gallery the west chamber was readily accessible; reminiscent of a church nave, this space must have evoked a sense of sanctity.⁵⁷ In this way the layout of the tower's top story would add the dimension of a heavenward

54 Several other features of its architectural design support this seeming correlation. For instance the east triconch chamber finds parallels among scalloped bemas seen in numerous Middle and Late Byzantine churches and chapels, both in the capital and throughout the provinces. See C. Mango, "The Monastery of St. Abercius at Kurşunlu (Elegmi) in Bithynia," $DOP\ 22$ (1968): 169-76, esp. 172, n. 11; C. Bouras and L. Boura, $H \in \lambda\lambda\alpha\deltaix\eta'\gamma\alpha\alpha\deltao\mui\alpha$ $x\alpha\tau\alpha$ τ ov 120 $\alpha i\omega\gamma\alpha$ (Athens, 2002), 358-59.

Furthermore, in the Rila tower the vaulting clearly helps to assert the connection with ecclesiastical design. First of all, placing domes above both the bema and the nave was a frequent design in Byzantine churches. The presence of two domical vaults in the gallery's west wing is reminiscent of a twin-domed narthex. Likewise the domical vault surmounting the southeast bay makes it look similar to a domed lateral chapel. Moreover, the apparent difference in the height on the one hand of the east and

west chambers and on the other hand of the gallery is consistent with the elevation of Byzantine churches in general. In church design, the nave, bema, and side chapels would rise higher than the narthex and the ambulatory wings. On the exterior this arrangement would contribute to the articulation of cascading roofs, which would appear to be spilling down from the main dome above the nave. In contrast, at Rila this difference is discernible only inside the top story. Here the external articulation of the elevation, surprisingly, is functionalit makes possible the construction of the crenellated walkway's platform, which runs along the depression between the walls crowned with battlements and the roof above the two domed chambers (fig. 17).

Most publications discussing the Rila tower summit refer to the east chamber as the nave and the west room as the narthex; see Prashkov, *Krel'ovata kula*, 16–18; Chaneva-Dechevska, *Tsurkovnata arkhitektura v Bulgariia*, 137 (both n. 1 above).

The ground plans of these two towers are identical—squares of virtually the same dimensions flanked by twelve buttresses, three on each side of the square. Characteristically, only the west end of their top-story chapels had direct access to the gallery wings, thus isolating the eastern section from traffic and other disturbances. In both pyrgoi the access to the top floor was through the gallery's north wing (figs. 18 and 30).

In its original arrangement, the chapel at the Tower of St. George had a timber roof. Vaulting was introduced in the major renovation during the post-Byzantine period (see Nenadović, "Arhitektura Hilandara," 160). By contrast, in the Rila tower, as described above, the association with ecclesiastical design was carried out beyond the general layout into the elevation and the vaulting of the tower's summit.

The Rila pyrgos is the only known example of such a monastic building in which ecclesiastical and defense features are not simply on the same floor, but actually within the same interior. The presence of machicolations within this interior might indicate that the builders considered the elaborate architectural articulation of the Rila summit to be a means of presenting the area as less a utilitarian space than a monastic one.

- 55 T. Macridy, A. Megaw, C. Mango, and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Monastery of Lips (Fenari Isa Camii) at Istanbul," *DOP* 18 (1964): 251–315, esp. 267–72; Krautheimer, *Architecture*, 423–24 (n. 7 above); Ćurčić, *Gračanica*, 128–32 (n. 23 above); Ousterhout, *Kariye Camii*, 57–61, 70–78 (n. 7 above).
- 56 All-night vigilance, while standing or sitting on benches, was a time-honored ascetic practice. Also ascetics often took short naps while sitting on simple benches; see Patrich, Sabas, 230–31 (n. 4 above).
- 57 The passage from the narthex to the nave of a church was thought to embody an entrance into heaven from earth; see S. Gerstel, Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary, Monographs on the Fine Arts 56 (Seattle, 1999), 5–10, esp. 6.

progression to the movement across its interior, thus raising to a new level the preceding ascent through the tunnel of the stairwell leading toward this space (see above). At last, after advancing through the west chamber and crossing the final threshold one would enter the triconch room, which intentionally evokes associations with church bemas.

If God were to grant a vision to a fervently imploring ascetic, would it not be most likely in a prayer chamber, soaring high above the ground yet akin to a bema—the place where theophany would occur regularly during the ritual of the liturgy? It must have been a special privilege to spend long hours—most likely entire nights—calling upon God in the solitude of the east chamber. The proximity to heaven in both physical and symbolic terms affirmed the probability of spiritual enlightenment. Spending the night in prayer in the east chamber and witnessing the increasing amount of light coming through the apse window might then have acquired the significance of a revelation. As if granted in response to the prayers of the all-night vigil, the sunrise would enable an ascetic to start reading the fresco program; it would begin to reveal itself as his eyes grew accustomed to the increasingly illuminated, ascending vaults.⁵⁸

During the Late Byzantine period both ascetics and secular dignitaries believed in the benefits of solitary prayer within a small, elevated space—a space whose architecture purposefully evokes ecclesiastical designs. Accordingly such lofty chambers appear not only in monastic dwellings but in aristocratic residences as well. In Constantinople the Palaiologan palace known as Tekfur Saray has just such a prayer chamber on the top story. The chamber has elaborate vaulting that includes a semi-dome above the oriented apse and a dome above the main space. With the support of corbels, this minuscule chamber measuring 2×3 m on the interior extends beyond the building's south façade and soars approximately 13 m above the ground (fig. 33). Such an arrangement did provide some additional space, but the actual amount of that increase appears virtually negligible given the palace's overall dimensions. The builders' primary concerns most likely involved accentuating this chamber's elevated location with all of the symbolic implications stressed above.

While the prayer chamber provided for looking upwards and addressing God in heaven, at the top story the palace occupant could also look down at those under his authority. Making this possible was a balcony suitable for ceremonial appearances and projecting from the east façade at the level of the

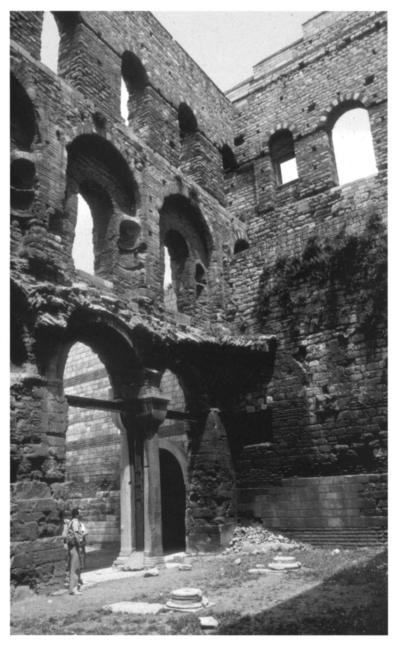


- 58 See below for a brief discussion of the fresco program. On the studies dedicated to the frescoes, see above, n. 1. On the association of night vigils and visions occurring in the course of monastic prayer see R. F. Taft, "Mount Athos: A Late Chapter in the History of the Byzantine Rite," DOP 42 (1988): 188, n. 81.
- 59 W. Müller-Wiener, Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls: Byzantion,
 Konstantinopolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn d. 17 Jh. (Tübingen, 1977), 244–46; M. Ahunbay, "Tekfur Saray: Istanbul, Turkey," in Secular Medieval Architecture, 248–51 (n. 1 above); Ćurčić, "Houses," 236–37, figs. 10–11 (n. 6 above).
- 60 In older publications some experts identified this chapel as a fortification feature because of its resemblance to a box machicolation. Ćurčić pointed out this misconception; see "Houses," 236.

Fig. 33 Tekfur Saray, Istanbul, south façade with top-story prayer chamber (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

palace's top story.⁶¹ Terraces are yet another feature that monastic towers and aristocratic residences share. Although suitable for active defense, the wooden balconies in Rila and the two Hilandar pyrgoi most certainly fulfilled other functions. As conspicuous exterior features of these monuments' upper sections, the balconies signaled the presence of places of distinction within. The sight of an ascetic spending long hours in prayer and meditation on such a balcony must have been inspirational for the brethren below who were seeking to emulate such piety. Moreover the balconies must have complemented the elevated interiors by providing areas open to the sun, the breezes, and the vista.⁶²

Yet another architectural feature that the Rila tower summit shares with Late Byzantine palaces is its window seats, which provide further evidence for the practice of contemplating vistas. On Tekfur Saray's second story the

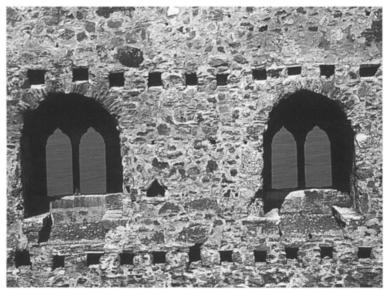


- 61 On this balcony and its function, see S. Ćurčić, "Late Medieval Fortified Palaces in the Balkans: Security and Survival," Monument and Environment 6 (2000): II-39, esp. 15-16. Tekfur Saray featured a fortified tower, the access to which was through the palace's uppermost story, where the elevated prayer chamber and the balcony were located. Clustering of similar features at the summits of monastic towers further supports the argument about the conceptual link between monastic and domestic architecture, see ibid., esp. 12-14. See also above, n. 6.
- 62 On sunrooms and balconies in Byzantine secular architecture, see A. K. Orlandos, "Τα παλάτια και τα σπίτια του Μυστρά," Άρχ Βυζ.Μνημ.Ελλ. 3 (1937): 3–114, esp. 73–77, 107–13; Moutsopoulos, Άρχιτεκτονική προεξοχή, 319–60 (n. 11 above); R. Ousterhout, "Secular Architecture," in The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era AD 843–1261, ed. H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom (New York, 1997), 197.
- Fig. 34 Tekfur Saray, Istanbul, interior, looking southwest (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)
- Fig. 35 Tekfur Saray, Istanbul, interior, south wall with second-story picture windows featuring both vista seats and built-in shelves (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)









clockwise

Fig. 36 Palace of the Despots, Mistra, interior of the throne room including windows containing vista seats (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

Fig. 37 Palace of the Despots, Mistra, windows with vista seats in the throne room (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

Fig. 38 Palace, Smederevo, interior of the former ceremonial hall with vista seats overlooking the Danube (photo courtesy of S. Ćurčić)

window niches accommodate a surface for sitting as well as built-in shelves (figs. 34, 35). The leisurely activities that must have occurred there apparently required certain paraphernalia; as such, one cannot help but wonder what sort of objects and books sat on these shelves. In the Palace of the Despots in Mistra the great hall also has windows of imposing design and proportions, many outfitted with seats.⁶³ The throne niche that appears in the center of the hall's east wall is flanked on both sides by three of these windows (figs. 36, 37). The throne apse lacks a window, thus providing the appropriate backdrop for a royal figure; but on both sides the windows frame views of the town of Mistra and its impressive natural setting.

There is a comparable arrangement in two other palaces from the Late Byzantine period: Golubac and Smederevo. In both cases the vista seats appear in the ceremonial halls and fit into window bays that overlook the expanse above the Danube (fig. 38).⁶⁴ One may grant that sweeping views have universal appeal since they generate such positive sensations as delight and tranquility. Yet because of their particular locations and individual functions, the buildings containing lookout points can bestow specific meanings on the vistas they command. For example, in all of the aforementioned palaces, the vista accentuated the elevated position of the ceremonial interior space—an elevation that corresponded to the ruler's dominance over his domain.⁶⁵

- 63 On Tekfur Saray, see above, n. 59. On the Palace of the Despots in Mistra, see Orlandos, "Παλάτια και σπίτια," 45–51, figs. 30, 39–43; M. Chatzidakis, Mistra: La cité médiévale et la forteresse (Athens, 1987), 111–15, fig. 70; S. Sinos, "Organisation und Form des byzantinischen Palastes von Mystras," Architectura 17 (1987): 105–28, esp. 123–25, figs. 19, 21, 22, 24; C. Bouras, "Palace of the Despots. Mistra, Greece," in Secular Medieval Architecture, 242–43, figs. 4–9 (n. 1 above).
- 64 G. Simić, "Palace: Golubac, Yugoslavia" and J. Nešković, "Citadel. Smederevo, Yugoslavia," both in *Secular Medieval Architecture*, 274–75 and 208–11, figs. 8–10, respectively (n. 1 above). See also Ćurčić, "Palaces in the Balkans," 29–32, figs. 21, 23, 27–29 (n. 61 above).
- 65 In my discussion of the vista as a component of palace architecture, I have benefited from reading D. Fairchild Ruggles, Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain (University Park, Pa., 2000), 106–9; eadem, "The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano-Umayyad Garden Typology," Muqarnas 7 (1990): 73–82.

Fresco Program

From the Rila tower's top story there are two different sights to contemplate: the vista seen from the gallery and the frescoes inside the chapel. Yet looking at one view means turning one's back to the other. The lack of choice in the matter results from the emphatic spatial division of the tower summit where the gallery envelops the chapel, within which there are no picture windows. 66 Nevertheless, a series of links, both explicit and implied, joins the landscape to the frescoes.

Contemplating the views from the gallery exalted the observers and emphasized their social and spiritual power. In addition there was the sitespecific symbolism: they gazed out at the mountain ridges that St. John made holy, living there in seclusion and performing his many miracles. Facing the expanse of the wilderness while, in a sense, soaring high above the land, the brethren emulated many venerated ascetics, including their own local patron, St. John. According to tradition, he spent seven years and four months on top of a cliff that stands near the present monastery complex. St. John's oldest vita, the text of which originated within the local monastic community, tells us that he spent this amount of time at the height of 40 sazhens (approximately 80 m) above the ground on a cliff's ledge that hung over a mountain precipice.⁶⁷ Even when turning their back to the view of the steep ridges surrounding the tower, the ascetics could have continued contemplating the same mountainous scenery by looking at the murals inside. The depiction of the Rila landscape is an essential component of the narrative hagiographical cycle representing the meeting of St. John of Rila with Tsar Peter I of Preslav. 68

The cycle starts on the south wall, continues to the west, and ends on the north wall, occupying the semi-domes above the south and north conches and the lunette above the doorway on the west wall. The opening scene depicts Tsar Peter seated in front of the large tent that he had perched on top of the mountain peak, while two bowing messengers take the tsar's request to find the hermit and let him know that the tsar desires to see him. The second composition illustrates the meeting of the messengers with St. John. Finally the third scene depicts the tsar and St. John exchanging bows from a distance or, as the *vita* has it, across the gorge of the Rila River, each of them standing on top of a mountain peak. Because of the wilderness and the distance between them the hermit and the tsar could not see each other; instead, they saw the signs of their presence—the royal tent and a heavenward column of smoke emanating from a fire lit by the recluse (figs. 39–42).⁶⁹

Driven by piety, both the hermit and the tsar ascended different mountain peaks and marked them as their dwelling places. Ordinary earthly abodes would have a shelter and a fire together at the same place, not on the opposite sides of a gorge. The intentional deficiency of this arrangement makes it clear that the two men strived not for common habitats but instead the only true and most desired dwelling for a believer—the eternal one in heaven. In this way the hagiographical fresco cycle sets up the theme of dwelling at elevated places in faithful worship as a paragon of piety. The rest of the fresco program develops this theme further.

Within the east chamber, the tent of the tsar and the hermit's roofless abode—"only the sky as my cover"—acquire additional meaning through the association with the fresco composition in the dome based on King Solomon's ninth proverb: "Wisdom has built a house for herself, and set up seven pillars. She has sent forth her servants, calling with a loud proclamation to the feast" (Prov. 9:1–3). Enthroned on a rainbow, the Divine Wisdom is surrounded by seven semi-nude winged figures—her pillars understood as the gift of the

66 It seems that from the start the gallery did not have any mural painting. The stone walls, surmounted by the red and white stripes of the brick vaults, surround the views of the mountain ridges that the windows frame. The abundant light coming from the gallery windows reaches into the chapel and softly illuminates the frescoes within. Yet the actual windows were far enough away that their striking views of the landscape did not compete with the chapel's frescoes.

67 This text, which dates to the 12th century, contains the following passage: "And he walked and found a rock. Its height was 40 sazhens, and it was as wide as a large shield. And ascending onto this rock, he spent on it seven years and four months, day and night without rest." English translation mine according to the text in K. Ivanova, Stara bulgarska literatura, vol. 4, Zhitiepisni tvorbi (Sofia, 1986), 126. The reference to the "shield" in the description of the rock is purposeful. It alludes to shield-raising-the ceremony of imperial accession performed during coronations—and thus speaks of the power invested in the ascetic through his life of pious seclusion. It also anticipates the subsequent meeting of the hermit and the tsar. See C. Walter, "Raising on a Shield in Byzantine Iconography," REB 33 (1975): 133-75; and M. McCormick, "Shield-Raising," ODB 3:1888.

In a 14th-century vita there is another reference to St. John's seclusion in an elevated place: "And he ascended onto a high place in the desert, and here he dwelled in virtue sustained only by wild plants" (Stishen Prolog, Sofia, Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, BAN no. 73, fols. 86a–88b); English translation mine according to Ivanova, Zhitiepisni tvorbi, 132 and 550–51.

A third source, The Testament of St. John of Rila (the authenticity of which has been questioned) contains the following passage: "I came to the Rila desert where I did not find a single man, but only wild beasts and thick forest, and here I lived with the beasts without a roof above my head, with only the sky as my cover, the earth as my bed, and wild plants as my food." Translation mine; Slavonic text in I. Goshev, "Zavetut na sv. Ivan Rilski v svetlinata na starobulgarskoto i na vizantiiskoto literaturno predanie," Annuaire de l'Academie de Théologie "St. Clement d'Ochrida" 30 (Sofia, 1954-55): 431-504, esp. 439. For another English translation of this text, see BMFD, 1:125-34.



Fig. 39 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, south conch, Tsar Peter sending messengers to St. John (photo by author)



Fig. 40 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, north conch, St. John and Tsar Peter exchanging bows (photo by author)

68 On Tsar Peter, see above, n. 25.

69 According to the 12th-century vita, the fame of St. John reached Tsar Peter while he was visiting the city of Sredets (ancient Serdica, modern Sofia). Overwhelmed with the desire to meet the holy man, the tsar sent nine messengers to the Rila Mountain. After wandering through the wilderness, the starving messengers reached St. John only because he had decided to help them by showing them the way and sharing with them his meal—rose hips that an angel had brought from heaven and that the saint then transformed into Communion bread. After the messengers' safe return, the tsar embarked on a journey to the Rila wilderness. The following paragraph, which narrates the events that occurred upon the tsar's arrival at Rila, was the literary source for the three hagiographical scenes in the chapel's east room.

And he [Tsar Peter] reached the river named Rila. And they told him: "Here is a sign of the saint and of the place [where he dwells] it is at the site of this river's spring." And they advanced along the river and reached the rock known as Stog. And they could not cross because the site was narrow and steep. And [after this] they went to the mountain known as Knishava, and they showed the tsar the mountain and the rock where the holy father dwelled. And the tsar wanted to go there, but he could not do so because of the desert, so [instead] he sent two of his servants after telling them: "Go and tell the holy father: 'Father, I came to see your honorable face, if you deem this possible." And the holy father replied to them: "Go back and tell him: 'O holy and glorious tsar, anything is possible by the will of God, but not by the will of man! If you desire to see me and be seen by me, then build your tent at the top of the mountain [where you presently are], and I will light a fire, so you can behold the smoke, and I can see your tent—this is how we are destined to see each other." And the holy father made his smoke as if a column reaching heaven.
And Tsar Peter saw the holy father's sign, while the holy father himself looked toward the tent, and the two of them praised the Lord and bowed to each other [at a distance]....
And since that day the place [where Tsar Peter built his tent] is known as the Tsar's [Mountain] Summit (Tsarev vrukh).

Translation mine, based on Ivanova, Zhitiepisni tvorbi, 128–29 (n. 67 above). On the reference to the Tsar's Summit in the Charter of Tsar Ivan Shishman from 1378, see Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 54–55 (n. 1 above).

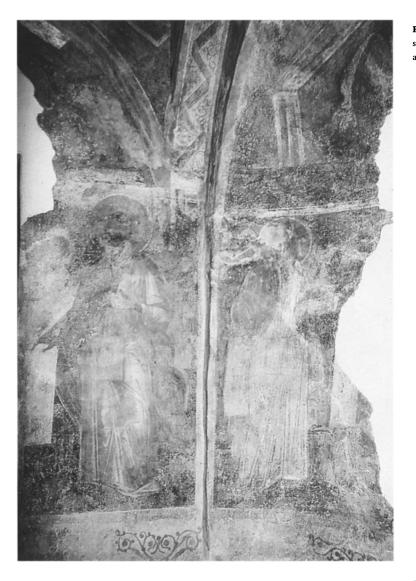


Fig. 41 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, southwest corner, ascetic saints (photo by author)

Holy Spirit. Immediately below them are four choirs of saints forming two processions, advancing from west to east and approaching the table set for Wisdom's feast. Leading the two eastbound saintly trains are the choir of apostles to the south and the choir of church hierarchs to the north. Following them are the groups of Old Testament kings and of martyrs, all clad in richly embellished royal and aristocratic costumes.⁷⁰ This composition in the dome and the scenes immediately below were very carefully coordinated. Thus the table of the heavenly feast appears right above the oriented altar apse where the semi-dome displays the bust of the Virgin Platytera, making explicitly clear that the celebration of the Holy Wisdom culminates in the Eucharist (figs. 26–28, 42).

In the west chamber, all the frescoes illustrate Psalms 148–50 in an extensive composition showing how heaven and earth praise God. The frescoes in the dome evidently depict the heights of heaven and therefore include the Pantokrator and those exalting him: "Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the highest. Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts. Praise him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars and light" (Ps. 148:1–3). Below

70 This arrangement unambiguously accords preeminence to the figures of spiritual authority. The composition in the dome and the scenes immediately below were very carefully coordinated. Furthermore images positioned along the vertical axes to the north, west, and south emphasize the complementary and harmonious relations between secular and spiritual authority, as does the hagiographical narrative cycle itself. The scenes that include the figure of the tsar are below the choirs of the apostles and church hierarchs, whereas the composition representing the hermit with the messengers falls under the groups of kings and martyrs. In the end, both the pious tsar and the hermit emerge as worthy of the privilege of joining the hosts of saints and sharing in the spiritual delights of Wisdom's feast.



the dome the painting represents the heights of the earthly realm: "Mountains, and all hills" (Ps. 148:9). Accordingly, in these scenes, a multitude of diminutive mounds take over the foreground so that the figures praising God can stand on elevated places, while in the background sharp mountain ridges loom. The hillcrest laudatory assembly includes "wild beasts, and all cattle; reptiles, and winged birds: kings of the earth, and all peoples; princes, and all judges of the earth: young men and virgins, old men with youths" (Ps. 148:10–12).

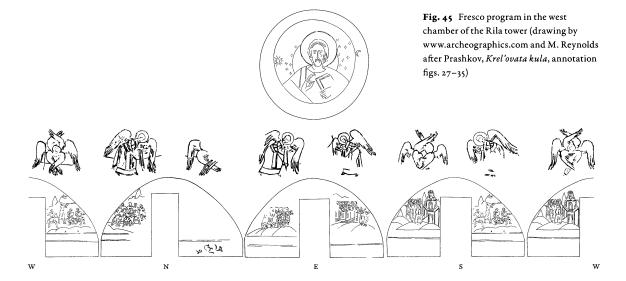
The angels and the groups glorifying God in the west room form processional lines positioned symmetrically along the main east—west axis. They are rendered to appear as if progressing eastward, converging by the doorway leading into the triconch chamber. The final verse of Psalm 148 refers to the praise of "all his saints" (148:14), yet the saintly choirs are conspicuously absent from the west room—instead, as discussed, they were allotted a place in the east chamber. This separation of the saints from the rest of the celebrants makes it clear that the ceremony in which they all partake evolves, advances, and culminates in the east room (figs. 25, 43–45).



Fig. 43 Rila tower, top story, west chamber, dome, worshipping archangel leading the northern line of an eastbound procession (photo by author)



Fig. 44 Rila tower, top story, west chamber, east wall, the laudatory group of old men (photo by author)



Progressing across the top-story interior toward the east chamber becomes a condensed and symbolically charged reenactment of actual eastbound journeys through the mountains. These recall St. John's original voyage to this site in the Rila desert, repeated by Tsar Peter and by numerous followers and pilgrims. In this passage toward the east, one would proceed through the mountain crannies—moving against the flow of the river, toward its source—and to the summit lookout points of St. John and of the tsar, rising on the opposite sides of the ravine. Within the tower's top floor, one experiences an analogous succession. Here the movement culminates in arrival at the chamber displaying the painted rendition of the place where the tsar and the hermit met, the actual view of this location concealed by the very walls covered with these frescoes.

By superimposing the painted scenery on the actual landscape, the spiritual significance of this landscape is effectively revealed. The sense of place and the prism of local history should color the view from the summit of the Rila pyrgos with an entire spectrum of meanings.⁷² For the brethren the act of contemplating the surrounding mountain summits became a symbolic gesture reenacting the manner in which the recluse and the tsar acknowledged each other's presence. Surely the ascetics found that the rising mountains foreshadowed both great trials to come and the promise of a future redemption. The looming steep ridges embodied the perilous yet awesome struggle to reach heaven.⁷³

73 The severity of the Rila landscape is a recurrent theme in the hagiographical literature dedicated to St. John of Rila. Cf. the text of St. John's *vita* by Patriarch Euthimios (1375–1394): "The tsar could not reach the place where the saint dwelled because of the steepness and ruggedness of the mountain. Since they could go no farther, they returned" (translation mine, according to Ivanova, *Zhitiepisni tvorbi*, 143 [n. 67 above]). Byzantine ascetics often secluded themselves in hostile terrain to confront the devil and ultimately prevail,

thereby receiving spiritual enlightenment; see Talbot, "Byzantine Monastic Horticulture," 38–39 (n. 10 above). On the general perception of the Byzantines, who viewed open landscapes as threatening and potentially dangerous, see Maguire, "Paradise Withdrawn," in *Byzantine Garden Culture*, 34–35 n. 54 (n. 10 above).

- Scholars have suggested that the building campaign carried out under the auspices of Khrel'o might have involved establishing a new site for the monastery complex, situated east of the original location and deeper into the defile of the Rila River. The only piece of evidence supporting this hypothesis is that, at a considerable distance west of the monastery, there is a site called Osianovo, a toponym mentioned in the 12th-century vita of St. John as the place where the recluse performed a miracle. It is difficult to imagine Khrel'o moving the monastery away from the original site of St. John's seclusion. If indeed he did so, there must have been a substantial—thus far unknown-reason. Nevertheless the progression eastward through the gorge and against the flow of the river remains an important part of the story, since one reads about it in the text of the 12th-century vita. See I. Ivanov, Sveti Ivan Rilski i negoviiat manastir (Sofia, 1917), 11, 33-34; Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 9; Kirin, "Mother of God Osianovitsa," 27 (n. 14 above).
- 72 In the process of investigating the connection between the scenery surrounding the Rila monastery and the frescoes within the tower summit, I benefited from reading A. Kuttner, "Looking Outside Inside: Ancient Roman Garden Rooms," Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscape 19 (1999): 7–30. Kuttner discusses the ways in which mural paintings in garden rooms "infuse landscape with literary, philosophical, political and religious resonance" (ibid., 9ff.).

The dwelling place of both the Divine Wisdom and those enlightened by that Wisdom, who have given themselves up to God, is the notion that brings into focus all the elements of the Rila tower: the topographic setting, its dedication, architecture, and mural painting. The wilderness of Rila became St. John's abode after he had devoted his life to God. Furthermore, within the dual dedication of the Rila tower to this saint and to the Mother of God Osianovitsa—"She Who Overshadows"—it is understood that the Virgin herself is the place where the Divine Wisdom once dwelled. The significance of this connection reveals itself in the specific way that the Slavonic epithet alludes to the tabernacle—the tent of the desert housing the Ark of the Covenant.⁷⁴ An important addition to this assembly of symbolic images is the fresco cycle depicting the episode from St. John's vita. It renders Tsar Peter's tent pitched on a mountain summit in the desert of Rila as the embodiment of his devotion to the recluse and ultimately of the tsar's union with God. Likewise Khrel'o's piety results in the creation of his own elevated dwelling—the pyrgos—intended for the patron's spiritual enlightenment.

Certainly the true house of the Divine Wisdom, the one that Christ the Logos built for himself, is his Church—the spiritual union bringing together the earthly realm and the Kingdom of Heaven. All this provokes a reassessment of the intentional combination of ecclesiastic and domestic features in the architectural arrangement of the Rila tower's summit. This design provides not simply for a multifunctional and highly efficient space, but also expresses devotion of one's life to God, and dwelling spiritually within the Church.

The highly desired state of living spiritually in the Church is as much a matter of occupying a specific physical space as it is of immersing oneself in perpetual prayer. The benefits of calling upon God in the desert of Rila are one of the main themes in the hymnographic compositions dedicated to St. John. These poetic works define Rila as a place of salvation and as God's mountain, and they do so by echoing the imagery of the Psalms. In fact the Slavonic poet explicitly stated that, following the example of the singing King David, the Rila recluse climbed to a mountaintop and in this way himself became like Mount Sion. The ascetics secluded in the pyrgos encountered these images, not only through the canons performed once or twice a year on the feast days

77 The following three troparia come from a 13th-century canon for 19 October, the feast day celebrating the transfer of St. John's relics from Sofia to Turnovo:

Like one tossed by storms over the depths of the sea,

You understood all and saved yourself, Rescuing yourself from the waves of the sea, By ascending to the mountain, you venerable one.

You ascended—venerable one—to God's
mountain, as it is written,
All earthly worries left behind, Father John,
You came to the divine rock—the cornerstone, Christ—
Fulfilling through abstinence His commands,
So that we may also be strengthened in our

 $adoration\ of\ Him.$

To God's mountain you ascended,
To the singing David you listened,
And to the mountain in the desert you
hastened,
Knowing that every place on earth is God's;
Yearning for him, John,

You became like Mount Sion.

Translation mine, according to *Bulgarskata* literature, 70–71 (n. 75 above); Kozhukharov pointed out the references to Ps. 23:3 and 124:1 in these troparia (ibid., 232–33).

- 74 Kirin, "Mother of God Osianovitsa."
- 75 The hymnographic cycle dedicated to St. John of Rila is composed of eleven canons containing more than 350 troparia; see Bulgarskata literature i knizhnina prez XIII vek, ed. S. Kozhukharov and I. Bozhilov (Sofia, 1987), 30–31, 231–32. On this hymnographic cycle, see S. Kozhukharov, "Sluzhba za Uspenieto na Ivan Rilski (Novotkrita nairanna redaktsiia ot XIII v.)," in Izsledvaniia vurkhu istoriiata i dialektite na bulgarskiia ezik: Sbornik v chest na ch.-kor. Kiril Mirchev, ed. V. I. Georgiev (Sofia, 1979), 217–34; idem, "Kum vuprosa za poniatieto 'starobulgarska poeziia," Literaturna misul 7 (1976): 35–54.

76 Because of the natural surroundings of Rila monastery, the local cult of Osianovitsa could have evoked associations with the mountain as the symbol of the Virgin—the mountain in which God has delighted to dwell: cf. Ps. 68:16–17. On the depiction of the image of the Virgin as the mountain of God in miniature painting and the literary sources elaborating on this comparison, see K. Corrigan, Visual Polemics in the Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters (Cambridge, 1992), 38–40, fig. 50.

Concerning "miraculous mountains" and "sanctified hills" as places of saints' seclusion see G. Vikan, "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium," in his Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium, Variorum Collected Studies Series (Aldershot, 2003), no. IX: 65–86, esp. 67–68. In general, on the role of mountains in defining sacred spaces inhabited by ascetics, see A.-M. Talbot, "Les saintes montagnes à Byzance," in Le sacré et son inscription dans l'espace à Byzance et en Occident: Études comparées, ed. M. Kaplan (Paris, 2001), 263–75.

of St. John, but also in the more frequent recitation of the entire Psalter—the quintessential monastic prayerbook used for all-night vigils or recited within a day and night. By chanting the Psalms continuously, the ascetics must have come to appreciate the similarity between the actual landscape around them and the mountain imagery of the Psalter. In particular, the encircling ridges of Rila would have certainly called to mind the image from Psalm 125:1–2 describing God surrounding his people like mountains. Because of the tower's architecture and frescoes, as well as the physical presence of the Rila Mountains, the faithful brethren could progress successfully from contemplating the real world to achieving the ideal, from seeing only material nature to a vision of the immaterial. For them Rila would become Sion, and the desert a true paradise.

78 The recitation of the entire Psalter as a part of the all-night vigil-agrypniawas observed by monastic communities on the eve of a Sunday or a feast day; see R. Taft, The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today, 2nd rev. ed. (Collegeville, Minn., 1993), 165-200, 277-78. Apart from this communal form of psalmody, there was also the one that cenobitic and lavriote monks performed in the privacy of their hermitages and cells. This was a time-honored sign of monastic excellence, a spiritual exploit suitable for ascetics' solitary devotion; see Patrich, Sabas, 230-31 (n. 4 above). Cf. also A. Lingas, "Hesychasm and Psalmody," in Mount Athos, 155-68 (n. 2 above).

A document associated with the social and intellectual milieu to which Caesar Khrel'o belonged attests to the popularity of this practice among Slavonic-speaking ascetics. St. Sava Nemanja compiled A Rule for Psalter Readers, a guide for hermits dwelling in cells and thus unable to join a monastic community in its regular church services:

Let the Psalter be chanted within a day and a night. Brother, if you are awake because God has given you strength and vigor to exalt Him, and [if] you have finished reading the [entire] Psalter before dawn or before the end of the day, then begin anew [from the first psalm] and complete [chanting all of the psalms]. For the Psalter never ends.... Since David said: "Yours is the day and yours is the night"—do not abandon your rule, but finish the Psalter within a day and a night, and the Lord's grace will help you.... This rule is to be held five days; let it begin on Sunday night and let it end on Friday night before vespers, but on Saturday and Sunday follow not this rule.

Translation mine, according to Spisi Svetoga Save i Stevana Prvovenčanoga, ed. L. Mirković (Belgrade, 1939), 153-57. I would like to thank Dr. Svetlana Popović for making this text available to me. For further discussion, see S. Popović, "Sabaite Influence on the Church of Medieval Serbia," in *The Sabaite Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, ed. J. Patrich (Leuven, 2001), 385-407, esp. 396.

In essence the continuous chanting of the Psalter epitomized the perpetual praise of God. "By combining an allusion to the first verse of the Psalter (Ps. 1:1) with the praise of every living creature announced in the last verse of the Psalter (Ps. 150:6) St. Gregory [of Nyssa] proclaims that this perpetual praise of God is the true meaning of blessedness, and, by implication, that the goal of the Psalter is to lead one to this state" (R. E. Heine, Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes [Oxford, 1995], 15, 122–23).

- 79 "They that trust in the Lord *shall* be as Mount Sion.... The mountains are round about her, and so the Lord is round about his people, from henceforth and even for ever" (Ps 125:1-2). Cf. "Just as the mountains surround the city, so divine care is a guard around the godly people" (Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. R. C. Hill [Washington, D.C., 2000], 2:290; PG 80:1885).
- 80 Cf. W. Loerke, "'Real Presence' in Early Christian Art," in *Monasticism and* the Arts, ed. T. G. Verdon and J. Dally (Syracuse, N.Y., 1984), 29–48, esp. 46–47.

Postmedieval Developments

The Rila tower summit functioned as a place of ascetic seclusion for nearly six hundred years, from the time of its construction to the turn of the twentieth century. Given this length of time, it is hardly surprising that the original top-floor arrangement was altered. Inevitably its complex message—reflecting at once the double dedication, the natural setting, the architecture, and the murals—lost some of its poignancy. Indicative of this, during the first half of the nineteenth century Father Neophytos of Rila, who was a prominent member of the monastic community, referred to the tower summit as the Church of the Transfiguration. Indicative of this was a popular dedication for elevated tower chapels since it implied a connection between elevated sites and theophanies, because Mount Tabor was where the Transfiguration of Christ had occurred. Even though rearranged and rededicated, the tower summit at Rila remained an ascetic abode and a church that offered awe-inspiring views of the surrounding mountain scenery.

In 1904, after an earthquake caused some damage, the Rila brethren renovated the tower summit.⁸³ Indeed, by that time the top-story interior had already acquired a layout closely corresponding to the functional organization of a church, with clearly defined bema and nave, as well as a diminutive chamber reminiscent of a lateral chapel. Three additions, albeit small, introduced this significant change.⁸⁴

First, an iconostasis was added, dividing the interior in such a way that it isolated the west chamber's east section along with the entire east room.⁸⁵ In this manner the icon screen clearly transformed the triconch eastern chamber into the sanctuary of the renovated chapel (fig. 46).

The second alteration to the top-story interior concerned the east niche of the triconch, the lower section of which was filled with masonry forming an 81 Prashkov, *Khrel'ovata kula*, 15 (n. 1 above).

82 Talbot, "Saintes montagnes," 263-64 (n. 76 above).

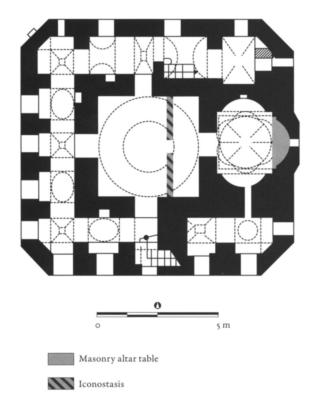


Fig. 46 Plan of the sixth story in the Rila tower after post-Byzantine alterations (drawing by www.archeographics.com and M. Reynolds after Prashkov, *Khrel'ovata kula*, fig. 8)

83 Basing my conclusions on the available published sources, I assumed originally that the Rila brethren renovated the tower summit in the late 18th century. An inscription found on one of the chairs in the chapel supposedly recorded this renewal. Prof. Prashkov published this hitherto unknown inscription: "Let it be known that the hermits' church was renewed and consecrated at the time of hegoumenos kyr Gerasim [by] the ktetor and warden hieroschemonachos Theophil in the year of the world 7300 and the year of our Lord 1792, on the fourteenth day of December. Then in the distance Petronii the blacksmith was striking and striking reaping hooks and sharpening hammers at this time" (translation mine, according to Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 108).

In the 1970s, after removing the whitewash covering the entire top-story interior, the restorers discovered the discolored 14th-century frescoes as well as partially burned wooden lintels and stretchers. On the surface of the frescoes were graffiti dating as late as 1766 and 1773. Since these inscriptions were underneath the whitewash, Prashkov surmised that the frescoes whether damaged or not—remained uncovered until the renovation of 1792. This observation seemed to complement the evidence from the chapel's iconostasis, whose icons appeared to be of 18th-century date. See ibid., 107 n. 12, 108 n. 15. See also below, n. 85.

When this article was reviewed for publication, I was provided with two important pieces of information, both of which have never been published and are apparently extremely difficult to obtain. First, it appears that the chair featuring the inscription cited here did not in fact belong to the tower chapel. Instead it was moved to the tower summit from the hermitage dedicated to St. John the Theologian, located at the site known as Chernei. Thus, the inscription from 1792 bears no relevance for the chronology of the alterations in the summit of the Khrel'o's tower. The assumption that the frescoes were whitewashed in this year is incorrect because in 1898 a visitor to the tower commented on them being "lively and remarkable." See S. Bobchev, "Poklonienie na svetata Rilska obitel," Bulgarska sbirka (1898): 715. It would therefore appear that the frescoes in the tower chapel remained visible until 1904, when repair work was carried out in the tower, as document no. 1127 in the

- monastery archive affirms. I would like to express my gratitute to this article's reviewer for supplying this information.
- 84 In the restoration of the tower chapel carried out during the 1970s, all later additions were eliminated to reveal the original spatial arrangement. See Prashkov, *Khrel'ovata kula*, 22.
- 85 Prashkov (ibid., 108 n. 15) ascribed a late 18th-century date to the iconostasis found in the chapel at the time of the restoration. He based his judgment on the style of the icons apparently made for this particular iconostasis. One of the icons featured a scene of the Transfiguration, thus confirming the discussed rededication. Nevertheless, the actual rearrangement of the tower summit most likely did occur earlier. See the discussion below.



Fig. 47 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, archival photograph from the late 1960s made after the removal of the added masonry that formed an altar table and before the restoration of the frescoes (photo courtesy of National Institute for Monuments of Culture, Sofia)

altar table. This altar did not belong to the original building phase, nor was it introduced in the early twentieth-century renovation. The construction of the altar table predates the fire that made necessary the renovation of the tower summit. The relative chronology of this addition became apparent during the 1970s when the restorers removed the added masonry of the altar table and revealed the frescoes of the original painted layer in the lower portion of the apse. Remarkably, this part of the fresco ensemble displayed its original coloring—the added masonry had protected the painted surface from the fire damage that gave the rest of the murals their current sepia look (figs. 26 and 47). 86

The third alteration involved the addition of a wall that separated the two eastern bays of the south gallery, thus forming a small lateral room communicating with the triconch only. To provide this connection, the brethren had a doorway cut into the triconch's south apse, which led to the destruction of some of the murals there (figs. 46, 48). Scholars proposed three different possible functions for the minuscule chamber in the southeast corner

86 Prashkov, Khrel'ovata kula, 20–21.

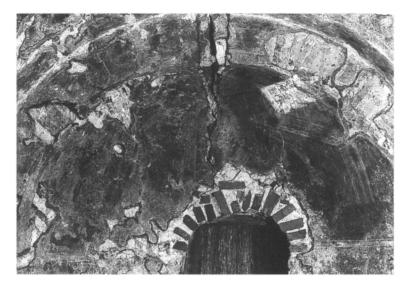


Fig. 48 Rila tower, top story, east chamber, south conch, archival photograph from the late 1960s, showing an outcome of a post-Byzantine rearrangement—a doorway leading to a southeast chamber (photo courtesy of National Institute for Monuments of Culture, Sofia)

of the top floor: a room housing the bells, a space intended for the guards (sic), or a *skeuophylakeion*.⁸⁷ Of these options, only the last seems plausible.

There is yet another way to explain the purpose of this chamber. This space apparently afforded both a great deal of privacy and an aura of sanctity because of the direct link with the sanctuary. Indeed this room could have functioned as did a Late Byzantine *katechoumenon*, where a distinguished ascetic would reside in isolation and from a remove follow the celebration of holy services.⁸⁸ The southeast chamber in Rila combined the common features of a Late Byzantine *katechoumenon* with a belvedere. Here the outer walls were taken over by three of the gallery's arched picture windows facing east and south.⁸⁹

The described alterations of the top story suggest an important shift in the manner in which this space was used. It would appear that the main goal of the renovation was to make the elevated hermitage suitable for regular celebration of the liturgy. Perhaps this need arose at a time when the main church could not fulfill its functions because of security concerns or because it was in disrepair. Also it is likely that the number of monks spending time in the tower's top story increased and, as a result, this space became less quiet and serene. Either way there must have been a need to create the private space suitable for the pious isolation of a *ktetor* or an outstanding ascetic; hence the new southeast chamber.⁹⁰

Given the scarcity of evidence, the specific date when the Rila tower summit underwent its initial alteration remains unknown. What is certain is that the described changes occurred after the frescoes were finished around 1342 but before they were whitewashed in 1904. Within this period of 562 years, the most significant events in the history of the monastery were the fifteenth-century renewal, followed by the transfer of St. John's relics from Turnovo to Rila in 1469. The fifteenth-century writer Vladislav the Grammarian, when discussing the renewal, states emphatically that only two buildings survived, namely the katholikon and the tower. Although the information in this source is far from conclusive, it suggests that the layout of the summit in the Rila pyrgos may not have been changed during the course of the fifteenth-century renewal. If so, the alterations could have been introduced in the period that followed, during the sixteenth or seventeenth century.⁹¹

—The University of Georgia, Athens

87 Ibid., 107 n. 13.

88 S. Ćurčić, "What Was the Real Function of the Late Byzantine Katechoumena?" *BSCAbstr* 19 (Princeton, N.J., 1993): 8–9; idem, "The Meaning and Function of Katechoumenia in Late Byzantine and Serbian Architecture," in *Manastir Ziča* (Kraljevo, 2000), 83–92.

89 In the Tower of St. George at Hilandar there was a similar connection between the altar area and the southeast section of the gallery. Here the original arrangement included a window in the east end of the chapel's south wall. Through this window the altar area communicated visually and acoustically with the south gallery. Along with this a wall in the southwest section of the top floor narrows the passageway and separates the southern from the western gallery wing. As a result, the south gallery stands out as a spatial unit in itself, significant because of its link to the chapel's altar area. Cf. Nenadović, "Arhitektura Hilandara," 158-60, figs. 63-65; idem, Osam vekova Hilandara, 233-37, figs. 292-94 (both n. 21 above); Todić, "Freske XIII veka," 38 (n. 46 above).

90 Similar concerns led St. Neophytos of Paphos to create his enkleistra. C. Mango and E. J. W. Hawkins, "The Hermitage of St. Neophytos and Its Wall Paintings," DOP 20 (1966): 121-206, esp. 124-26; C. Galatariotou, The Making of a Saint: The Life, Times, and Sanctification of Neophytos the Recluse (Cambridge, 1991), 107-9, 170-74, 247-48; R. Cormack, Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and Its Icons (London, 1985), 215-51, esp. 248-49; Ćurčić, "Katechoumena," 84-85.

91 Vladislav the Grammarian, "Treatise on the Transfer of St. John's Relics to the Rila Monastery," in *Zhitiepisni tvorbi*, 383–91, esp. 384 (n. 67 above); Duichev, *Rilskiiat svetets*, 270–98 (n. 24 above).

All Old Testament quotations in this article follow *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, ed. L. C. L. Brenton (London, 1851; repr. 1996). The epigraph from St. John's *vita* is cited in my English translation according to the edition by Ivanova, *Zhitiepisni tvorbi* (n. 67 above), 128; cf. above, n. 69. For the careful editing of this translation and the article's text as a whole, I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Stuart Lee Brown, whose contributions to this project went beyond the responsibilities of an editor.